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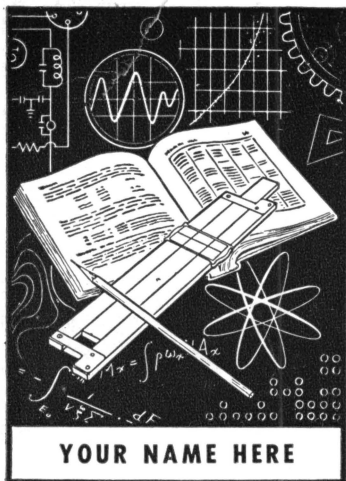
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FEBRUARY, 1965

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**ALL NEW
STORIES**

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Diane Sullivan, Associate Editor

Mavis Fisher, Subs. Mgr.

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Science Fiction in Academe

Shortly before this issue of *If* appears we expect to visit the campus of Wooster College in Ohio to take part in the 1964 session of the Modern Language Association's annual symposium on science fiction.

This sort of event has become rather un-newsworthy of late. The University of Chicago, perhaps, led off the trend with its seminar on science fiction a few years ago. At U.C.L.A., a depository for science-fiction magazines has been established — not just the newsstand publications like *If*, *Galaxy* and *Worlds of Tomorrow*, but the mimeographed, hectographed and even carbon-copied "fanzines" published for limited circulation by science-fiction readers all over the world. Syracuse University is attempting to establish another sort of depository, collecting the papers of science-fiction writers as a permanent record of their lives and thoughts.

This growth of scholarly interest in science fiction is both pleasing and sobering — pleasing because we like science fiction, and like to have other people take an interest in it; sobering because it somehow has the aroma of erecting a monument. (An honor which is, of course, usually reserved for the dead.)

Now, we don't think for one minute that science fiction is dead,

or even showing signs of failing. We think it's here to stay.

We do think, though, that there has been some visible tendency for science-fiction writers and editors to begin to take themselves a little over-seriously, as though conscious of the scholarly eyes upon them; and we have the uneasy notion that the sort of self-consciousness that feeling engenders could in the long run be serious. After all, science fiction's greatest merit lies in its tolerance of the way-out and its freedom from convention!

As we see it, it's our job, especially here in *If*, to stay loose. No formulas. No playing it safe.

What we think we ought to be doing here in *If* is turning up all the new talent we can (as in our "firsts" — this month's is J. L. Frye, with *Zombie*), enticing back the greatest of the old masters (as with A. E. Van Vogt, herewith, and Doc Smith's *Skylark DuQuesne*, coming up shortly) — and giving them all as much freedom as they need to keep us all alert . . . and entertained!

We hope we're succeeding in this. Judging by the letters we get for *Hue and Cry* (squeezed out of this issue, by the way — but back next month), most of you feel we are. But if you think not, or if you have an idea of how we can do things better — let's hear from you!

— THE EDITOR

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THE REPLICATORS

by A. E. VAN VOGT

Illustrated by MORROW

**The alien was mighty but it could be
killed—again and again and again!**

I

Standing there, after killing the monster, Matlin began to get mad.

In its death throes, the twelve-foot creature had done a violent muscular convulsion and somersaulted over into the dump section of Matlin's truck.

There it lay now, with its ele-

phantine head and quarter-length trunk twisted to one side, and a huge arm and hand flung up and visible over the rear end. What must have been tons of shiny, black body was squashed limply down into the bottom of the cavernous metal carrier . . . creating a problem.

That was all it was to Matlin: a problem.

Steve Matlin was an abysmally suspicious and angry man. His impulse now was to dump the beast in the weeds beside the road. Reluctantly, he decided against that. He had unfortunately been seen driving along this little used lake road by the two officers of a highway patrol car. If the patrolmen found the creature's body, they would assume that he had shot it.

This benighted man, Matlin, envisioned himself as being the person who would have to see to the disposition of the dead monster. As he reasoned it out, if he made the mistake of dumping it in the wrong place, he'd have to hire a crane to get it into his truck again. And if he simply took it home, he'd have the job of digging a hole for it.

"Better take it to the police," he decided gloomily, "and follow their advice like a good little fellow."

Seething at the nuisance, but resigned, he drove to the main highway. There, instead of turning left to his farm, he headed for Minden, the nearest suburb of the city. Arrived in town, he drove straight to the police station, braked to a halt, and vigorously honked his horn.

Nobody showed.

The exasperated Matlin was about to lean on his horn and really blast them with sound, when he made an electrifying discovery. The police headquarters was on a side street and, whatever the reason, there wasn't a car or person in sight.

. . . Hot afternoon, empty street, rare opportunity —

Matlin tripped the lever that

started the dump mechanism. A moment later, he felt the beast's body shift. He simply drove out from under it and kept on going, gunning his motor and reversing the dump mechanism.

II

That night before they went to bed, his wife, Cora, said to him, "Did you hear about the creature from space?"

Matlin's mind leaped to the memory of the beast he had carted into town. He thought scathingly: "Those nuts! Creature from space indeed!" But he said aloud, gruffly, "You watching that junk on TV?"

"It was in the news report," she said defensively. "They found it right there in the street."

So it *was* the thing he had killed. He felt a sudden glee. He'd got away with it. He thought smugly: "Saved myself twenty-five bucks. Time I had a little luck."

He went silently to bed.

Cora lay for a while, listening to his peaceful breathing, thinking of the monster from space — and thinking of the universe that she knew existed somewhere beyond the narrow world of Steve Matlin. She had once been a teacher. But that was four children and two decades ago. It was a little hard sometimes to realize how far away the real world was these days.

Out there, a creature never before seen on earth had been found lying dead in the street in front of the Minden police station. The TV cameras brought front views, side



views and top views into everybody's living room. No one had any idea how the thing had gotten where it was discovered, and, according to the news commentators, top government and military officials were beginning to gather around the colossal corpse like buzzing flies.

Two days went by. A monster-hunting expedition arrived at the Matlin farm — among other places — but Cora shook her head to their questions and denied in a take-it-for-granted tone that Steve was the one who had transported the beast. "After all," she said scathingly, "he would have told *me*. Surely, you — uh!"

She stopped, thought: "That man! That incredible man! *He could have.*"

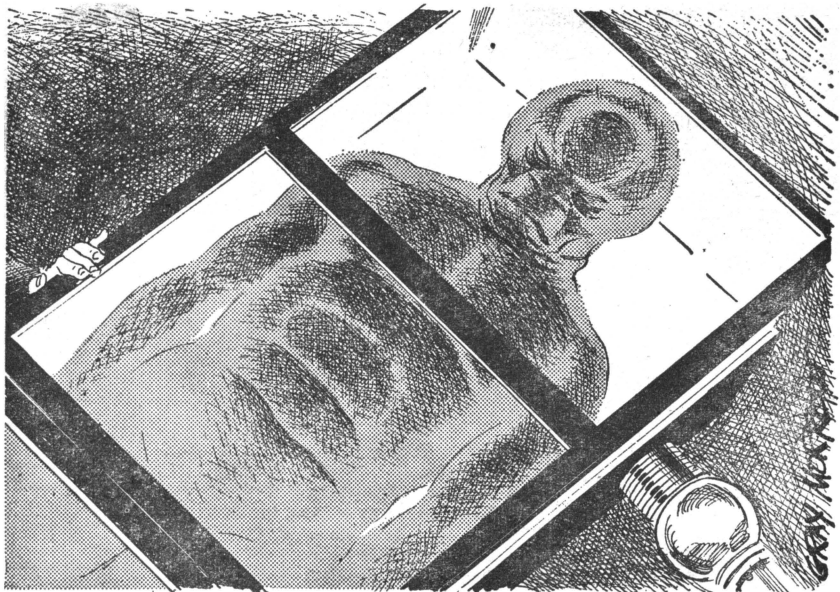
The visitors seemed unaware of

her sudden confusion. And they also evidently believed that a husband would have told his wife. The principal spokesman, a fine looking, soft-voiced man of her own age, who had introduced himself as John Graham — and who was the only person present not in a police or military uniform — said in a kindly tone, "Tell your husband there's quite a reward already, something like a hundred thousand dollars, for anyone who can help us effectively."

The expedition departed in a long line of noisy motorcycles and cars.

It was about mid-morning the next day when Steve Matlin saw the second monster.

He had been following the trail of the first one from the lake road. And suddenly here was another.



He dived into a gully and lay there, breathless.

What he had expected, in coming here by himself, Matlin had never considered clearly. When Cora had told him of the reward money, he had instantly derided her trusting nature.

"Those S.O.B.'s will never split that reward with anyone who hasn't got his claim staked and ready to fight," he had said.

He had come to stake his claim.

His shock on seeing this second creature was like a multitude of flames burning inside him. He was aware of the heat rising along his spine and searing his brain. Fear! Trembling, he raised his rifle.

As he did so, the creature — which had been bending down — came up with something that glinted

in the sun. The next instant, a bullet whistled past Matlin's head and struck a tree behind him with an impact like a clap of thunder. The ground trembled. An instant later, the sound of an explosion came to Matlin's ears.

The explosion was loud enough to have come from a small cannon.

Even as he made the mental comparison from his experience as a Marine in World War II, the distant rifle — it *looked* like a rifle, though a huge one — spat flame again. This time the bullet struck the rock ten yards in front of Matlin and sprayed him with a shower of rock splinters. His body stung all over, and when he was able to look again — after the second explosion had echoed from the distance — he saw that his hands were covered

with dozens of droplets of his blood.

The sight was both terrifying and galvanizing. He slid back, rolled over, half-clawed to his feet and, bending low, ran to the gully's end, stopping only when he realized that it was becoming too shallow to be a shelter.

What could he do?

Shadowy memories came of wartime risks he had taken. At the time he had felt enforced, compelled by the realities of a war he never accepted — a war that had wasted several years of his life. But he remembered moving, crouching, going forward. He had always thought what a mad thing it was for a sensible person to force himself into enemy territory. Yet under the hated pressure of wartime discipline, he had resignedly gone into the most deadly situations.

Was it possible he would have to do that now — because of his own foolishness in coming here?

As he crouched there, appalled, two more cannonlike shells splattered the rock where he had been seconds before. A cannon against a rifle! Matlin wanted out, wanted away. The angry scheme he had had to get for himself whatever might be at the end of this search had no meaning in the face of the firepower that was seeking his destruction with each booming shot.

He lay cringing at the shallow end of the gully, not even daring to raise his head.

His own rifle seemed like a mere toy now . . .

The phone rang. When Cora answered, it took her several moments to recognize the hoarse voice at the other end as her husband's.

"I'm calling from a roadside pay phone. Can you find out where that monster-hunting expedition is now?" he said.

"Mamie just called. They were over at her farm. Why?"

"It's chasing me," he said. "Tell 'em I'm coming toward the highway from the boathouse. It's driving a dump truck as big as a house."

"What's chasing you?" Cora yelled into the mouthpiece. "Where?"

"A second one of the monsters. On that back road to the lake," Matlin moaned. And hung up.

III

The battle on the highway began about two o'clock in the afternoon. The creature climbed out of the cab of a dump truck that stood twenty feet high. Crouching behind the vehicle, it fired with a rifle the size of a cannon at anything that moved.

The two dozen men with their frail cars and tiny rifles crouched in the underbrush. Lying beside Graham, Matlin heard the man say urgently to an army major: "Call again for an air strike!"

It was about ten minutes after that that the first helicopter appeared on the horizon. It turned out to be an enterprising TV station's vehicle, with cameras aboard. The fluttering monstrosity of flying machine circled the dump truck, tak-

ing pictures of the great being beside it. At first it did not seem to occur to the creature to look at the sky for the source of the sound. But suddenly it got the idea.

Up came that long rifle. The first bullet smashed through the cockpit. A splinter from somewhere hit the pilot and knocked him unconscious. The helicopter flew off erratically. As it retreated, another gigantic bullet smashed its tail. The stricken whirlbird fluttered down among the trees on the other side of a low hill.

Worse, when the military helicopters arrived, they no longer had the advantage of surprise. The cannon-rifle fired at them as they approached. They veered off—but not before three went down, one in flames. With one exception, the others began to shoot back from a distance.

The exception flew off to the left, disappearing low behind a hill. It reappeared presently to the rear of the monster and, while the other machines kept up a barrage from in front, this lone helicopter came in on the target from behind.

The barrage of bullets that its pilot loosed downward almost tore off the great head of a creature which did not even see where the death came from.

Matlin walked forward with the others, angrily fingering the "claim" he had written out. It infuriated him that they were not offering to honor his rights. Even though he had expected it, the reality was hard to take.

Arrived at the truck, he stood impatiently by while the men examined the creature, the huge vehicle and the rifle. Matlin was drawn abruptly out of his irritated self-absorption with the realization that he had been twice addressed. Graham indicated the ten-foot rifle.

"What do you make of that?"

The question approach, the appeal to him on an equal basis, momentarily neutralized the timeless anger in Matlin. "Now!" he thought. He handed Graham his claim with the request, "I'd like you to sign this." Then he bent down beside the huge weapon and examined it.

He commented presently, "Looks like a pump action repeater, much like the one I've got, only many times as big. Could have been made by the same company."

It irritated him as he spoke to realize that Graham still held the claim sheet in his hand; had not even glanced at it.

Graham said in an odd tone, "What company?"

"Mine is a Messer," said Matlin.

Graham sighed and shook his head in bewilderment. "Take a look at the nameplate on that big gun," he said.

Matlin bent down. The word, "MESSER-made", stared back at him in indented, black metal lettering.

"And what's the name of your dump truck?" Graham asked.

Silently, Matlin loped around to the front of the over-sized truck, and peered up at the letters. They were exactly the same as on his own dump truck: **FLUG**.

When Matlin returned with the identification, Graham nodded, and then handed him back his claim sheet, and said evenly, "If I were to write that claim, Mr. Matlin, it would read: 'As the man who has done the most to prevent the creature from space being traced down, I recognize myself—' meaning you, Mr. Matlin— 'as the one person least qualified to receive the reward.'"

It was such an unexpected reaction, so instantly threatening to his rights, so totally negative, that Matlin blanched. But he was stopped by the words only for a moment. Then the anger poured.

"Why, you damned swindler!" he began.

"Wait!" Graham spoke piercingly, raised his hand in a warning gesture. His steely gray eyes were cynical as he continued: "Now, if you were to lead us onto the real back-track, help us locate these creatures, I'll reconsider that judgment. Will you?"

Night came and caught them on the hunt.

As the monster-hunting expedition camped beside the lake, the darkness was shattered by a thunderous roaring sound. Matlin tumbled from the back seat of his car, ran to the lake shore, and peered across the dark waters toward the island in the lake's center. He was aware of other men coming up behind and beside him.

It was from the island that the noise came.

"Sounds like a whole battery of

jet engines," somebody yelled above the roar, "and it seems to be coming this way."

Abruptly, the truth of that was borne out. The jet sound was suddenly above them. Framed in a patch of dark blue sky, a monstrous sized helicopter was momentarily visible.

It disappeared into a cloud bank. The great roaring receded, became a remote throb.

In the darkness, Graham came up beside Matlin, said, "Didn't you tell me you had a lakeside cabin near here?"

"Yeh." Matlin said wary.

"Got a boat there?"

Matlin jumped to a horrid conclusion. "You're not thinking of going over to the island?" he gulped. "Now!"

Graham said earnestly, "We'll pay you for the rent of the boat, and guarantee you against damages—in writing. And if that's the base these creatures operate from, I'll sign your claim."

Matlin hesitated. The boat and the lakefront property were his one dream. No one, not even Cora, had ever realized how much they meant to him. On the very day that he had killed the first monster, he had taken a load of sand from his farm and dumped it lovingly on the water's edge.

Standing there, Matlin visualized what the reward money would do for his dream: the rough shoreline fully sanded in, a hunting and fishing lodge, and a larger boat, the kind he had often fantasied but never managed to acquire.

"I'll do it," he said.

On the island, using his flashlight sparingly, Matlin led Graham and two other men to where the ground suddenly felt . . . harder.

When they dug down, they found metal bare inches under the grass.

Graham talked softly by two-way radio to the camp they had left and then held his radio for Matlin and himself to hear the answer: a parachute army would be called by way of the more powerful radio at the camp. By dawn, several hundred seasoned men with tanks, demolition units, and cannon would be down with them.

But, as the radio shut off, they were alone once more in the dark. The reinforcements of the morning were still hours away.

It was Matlin—again—who found the overhang that led into a huge, brightly lighted ship.

He was so intent, and interested, that he was inside the first chamber with the others before he clearly realized how far he had come.

He stopped. He half turned to run. But he didn't move.

The scene held him.

They were in a circular room about 400 feet in diameter. A number of solidly built metallic extrusions came up from the floor or down from ceiling. Except for them the room was empty.

Matlin went with the others to where a ramp led down to the next level. Here there were more of the huge, built-in machines—if that was what they were—but this level, also, was deserted.

On the third level, they found two sleeping "children".

Each lay on its back in a long, black, metal, box-like structure. The larger was about half the size of a full-grown alien, the smaller a mere bit of a thing two feet long. Both were stocky of body and were, unmistakably, younger versions of the two creatures that had already been killed.

As the three men—Graham and the two officers—glanced at each other questioningly, Matlin drew out his claim sheet, and held it toward Graham. The government agent gave him a startled look; then, evidently realizing Matlin meant it, he nodded resignedly, took the pen and signed.

The moment he had the claim sheet back in his hands, Matlin headed for the ramp.

He was sweating now with fear. Yet he realized he had had no alternative. He had to have that signature. But now—

. . . Get away from all this stuff that was none of his business!

When he reached the lakeshore, he started the motor of the motorboat, and headed back toward his boathouse. He locked up the boat, walked stealthily through the darkness to his car, and drove off.

As he came out of the line of trees a mile from his farm, he saw the entire yard was on fire. He heard the thunder of gigantic engines—

His house, his barn, his machine shed—all were burning! In the vivid, fitful light from the flames he saw the huge helicopter lift up from the far side and soar up into the night sky.

So that was where it had gone!

It passed by above him somewhat to his right, a colossal sound, the source of which was now completely invisible in the darkness of an over-cast sky.

Matlin found Cora and the son that was not away at school crouching in the field. She mumbled something about the monster having come over and looked down at them. She said wonderingly, "How did it know this was your farm? That's what I don't understand."

IV

The fire was dwindling. People were beginning to drive into the yard. Car doors slammed. In the fading brightness, Matlin in a bemused state carried his son and walked beside Cora to his station wagon.

He was having a different kind of thought. Why hadn't the creature killed his wife and child? Cora and the boy had been as completely at its mercy as the farm.

A neighbor named Dan Gray touched his arm and said, "How about you and Cora and the boy staying at my place tonight, Steve?"

By the time they got over on the Gray farm, a man was on TV describing how Steve Matlin had left three men at the mercy of the returning alien.

He named Matlin.

Matlin recognized the man who was talking as a member of the monster-hunting expedition.

He glanced around, saw that Gray, Gray's wife—a tall, thin wom-

an—and Cora were staring at him. Cora said in horror: "Steve, you *didn't!*"

Matlin was amazed. "I'm going to sue that fellow for libel!" he yelled.

"Then it isn't true," Cora wailed. "What an awful thing for them to say such a lie!"

Matlin was outraged at her misunderstanding. "It's not a lie, just a bunch of baloney. Why should I stay on that island? If they want to be crazy, that's their business."

He saw from their faces that his perfectly obvious truth was not obvious to them. He became grim. "Okay, I can see I'm no longer welcome. Come along, Cora."

Mrs. Gray said, tightlipped, "Cora and the boy can stay."

Matlin was quite willing, already at peace with their foolishness. "I'll pick you up in the morning," he said to his wife.

Cora did not reply.

Gray accompanied Matlin to his car. When he came back into the living room, he was shaking his head. He said to Cora, "One thing about that husband of yours. He lets you know where he stands."

Cora said stiffly, "He's let me know once too often. Imagine leaving those men!" There were tears in her eyes.

"He says they lured him over to the island."

"Nobody lures Steve. His own scheming got him over there."

"He says he suddenly realized the generals had done it again—got a private into the front line. And since this was not his war—"

"If it isn't his war, whose is it? He fired the first shot."

"Well, anyway, the generals are on the firing line, and no one could care less than Steve. I can tell you that."

"That's the astonishing thing," said Cora, wonderingly. "He thinks World War II was a conspiracy to waste his time. He lives entirely in his own private world. Nothing can shake him, as you just saw."

Matlin drove back to his farm and slept there in the back of his car.

When he returned to the Gray farm in the morning, Dan Gray came out to meet him. He was grinning. He said, "Well, Steve, it's finally going to be your war."

Matlin stared at the knowing smile on the somewhat heavy face of his neighbor, but the words seemed meaningless. So he made no reply but simply got out of his car and walked into the house.

The two women were watching the TV. Matlin did not even glance at the picture.

"Ready, Cora?" he said.

Both women turned and looked at him strangely. Finally, Mrs. Gray said breathlessly, "You're taking it very calmly."

"Taking what calmly?"

Mrs. Gray looked helplessly at Cora. "I can't tell him," she almost whispered.

Matlin glanced questioningly at his wife. She said, "You might as well hear it. The creature came back and found Mr. Graham and his two companions on the island. And it

talked to them through some kind of mechanical translation device. It said it was going to leave earth but that first it was going to accomplish one thing. It said—it said—"

Matlin said impatiently, "For Pete's sake, Cora, let's go. You can tell me on the way."

Cora said, "It said—it was going to kill you first."

For once Matlin was speechless.

At last he stammered: "Me!" After a moment, he added, incredulous, "That's ridiculous. I haven't anything to do with this business."

"It says you're the only one on earth who made it your business."

The shock was growing on Matlin. He could not speak, could not deny the charge in words. Inside his head, he protested silently: "But that first beast was coming toward me. How was I supposed to know?"

Cora was continuing in a grief-filled voice: "It says that on all the planets it's visited, no one has ever before killed without warning, without asking any questions."

Matlin stared at her with hopeless eyes. He felt battered, defeated, ultimately threatened. For a moment, again, he could scarcely believe. He thought: "I only want to be left alone!"

The thought stopped. Because he knew suddenly that all these years he had been maintaining an untruth: that what went on elsewhere was none of his affair.

He had pretended so hard, gone into such instant rages, that other people simply glanced at each other significantly and fell silent, and

thereafter never brought up the subject again. He had always thought with satisfaction, "By damn, they'd better not say anything but—" contemptuously—"let them think what they want."

And now, he was the only human being that a visitor from another planet felt motivated to kill . . .

He grew aware once more of Dan Gray's smile. The man spread his hands helplessly. "I can't help it, Steve. Believe it or not, I like you. I even think I understand you. But—forgive me, Cora—this seems to me to be a case of poetic justice. I can't think of anyone else who's had something like this coming to him for so long."

Matlin turned and walked out of the room. He was aware of Cora following him hastily. "Just a minute, Steve," she said, "I have something for you."

Matlin turned. They were alone in the hallway. He grew aware that she was tugging at her wedding ring. "Here," she said, "I should have given you this nineteen years ago, but I let the coming of our first child stop me."

She opened his palm, placed the ring in it, and closed his fingers over it. "You're on your own, Steve. After twenty years of being the most selfish, self-centered man in the world, you can face this as you should, by yourself."

Matlin scowled down at the ring, then: "Bah! When you look at me, you see the human race as it really is. I've never gone in for the shams, that's all."

He slipped the ring into his pocket.

"I'm going to keep this and give it back to you when you get over this foolish feeling. My feeling for you was never a sham."

He turned and walked out of the room and out of the house.

A car was pulling up in front of the Gray house. John Graham was inside it. He climbed out and walked over to where Matlin was about to get into his station wagon, said, "I came over to see you."

"Make it quick!" said Matlin.

"I have three messages for you."

"Shoot!"

"Obviously," said Graham, "the U.S. government will not allow one of its citizens to be casually exterminated."

Accordingly—he continued formally—all of the armed forces would be interposed between Steve Matlin and the alien.

Matlin stared at him with uncompromising hostility. "He can duplicate anything we've got, so those are just big words."

Graham said in the same formal way that the ability of the creature to duplicate, first, the rifle, then the truck, and then the helicopter, had been taken note of by the military.

Matlin's curt laugh dismissed as asinine the notion that the generals would know what to do with such information. "C'mon, c'mon," he said roughly, "what's the second message?"

"It's personal," said Graham.

He stepped forward. His fist came up, connected perfectly with Matlin's jaw. Matlin was knocked back against his car. He sank to the

ground, sat there rubbing his jaw and looking up at Graham. He said in an even tone: "Just about everybody seems to agree I had that coming to me, so I'll take it. What's the last message?"

Graham, who had evidently expected a battle, stepped back. His savage mood softened. He shook his head wondering. "Steve," he said, "you amaze me. Maybe I even respect you."

Matlin said nothing. He just sat there, elbows on knees.

After a moment, Graham continued: "The way the generals figure it, there's got to be another reason why the creature wants to kill you. Maybe you know something." His gray eyes watched Matlin closely. "Have you been holding anything back?"

Matlin shook his head but he was interested. He climbed slowly to his feet, frowning, thoughtful as he dusted himself off.

Graham persisted. "It is proposed that its ability to duplicate is based upon a kind of perception that human beings don't have."

"Hey!" said Matlin, eyes wide. "You mean like the homing pigeon, or birds flying south, or salmon coming back to their little pool where they were born?"

"The reasoning is," said Graham, "that you got some feedback on whatever it is, and so the creature wants to kill you before you can pass on to anybody else what you know."

Matlin was shaking his head. "They're off their rocker. I don't know a thing."

Graham watched him a moment longer. Then, clearly satisfied, he said, "Anyway, the military feel that they can't take a chance with a creature that has made a death threat against an American citizen. So they're going to drop an atomic bomb on it and end the matter once and for all."

For some reason, Matlin felt an instant alarm. "Just a minute," he said doubtfully. "Suppose it duplicates that? Then it'll have everything we've got, and we still won't have seen a thing *it's* got."

Graham was tolerant. "Oh, come now, Steve. The bomb will be a small one but the right size to pulverize that spaceship. I personally feel strong regrets about this but I have no doubt of the outcome. Once the bomb drops, it'll have nothing to duplicate with—and it won't be around to do any duplicating."

Matlin said, "Better tell them to hold that bomb till they've thought about it some more."

Graham was looking at his watch. "I'm afraid it's a little late for that, Steve. Because they figured you might have some telepathic connection with this creature, I've been holding back the fact that the bomb is being dropped—right—now!"

As he spoke, there was a sound of distant thunder.

Involuntarily, the two men ducked. Then they straightened and looked over the near farms, past the trees in the distance, beyond the low hills. A small but familiar and sinister mushroom was rising from the other side of the horizon.

"Well," said Graham, "that does

it. Too bad. But it shouldn't have made that threat against you."

"What about the other ship?" Matlin asked.

"What other ship?" said Graham. They had both spoken involuntarily. Now, they stared at each other. Graham broke the silence. "Oh, my God!" he said.

V

There were stubborn people at G.H.Q.

For two decisive days, they rejected the idea that there might be another ship.

Then, late in the afternoon of the third day, radar reported a small object high above field H from which the atomic plane had taken off to destroy the spaceship on the island.

Control tower challenged the approaching airborne machine. When there was no response, somebody became anxious and sounded a bomb alarm. Then he dived down a chute that took him head first into a shelter far below.

His quick action made him one of about 800 fast-reflex people who survived.

Seconds after he made his dive to safety, an atomic bomb demolished field H.

About the same time, a TV helicopter was hovering above the island in Matlin's lake, taking pictures of the bomb crater there. Suddenly a spaceship came silently down from a great height and landed.

The helicopter did not tarry. It took rear view pictures as it was fleeing the scene.

Graham went to see Cora, looking for Matlin.

But she could only shake her head. "Steve said he was going on the road till this whole thing blew over. He said he figured he'd better not be sitting still when that creature came looking for him."

They put Matlin's photo on TV.

On the fourth day after that, Graham interviewed four sullen young men who had tried to seize Matlin, their intention being to deliver him to the monster. As their spokesman put it, "By handing over the one guy who was really involved in this business, the rest of us could have gone back to our daily affairs."

They filed out, one on crutches, two with arms in slings, all bandaged in some way, groaning a little.

The following day, Graham interrogated two people who claimed to have witnessed a duel on an open stretch of highway between Matlin in a station wagon and the monster flying an enormous jet plane. Matlin had had a bazooka and the beast had finally beat a retreat.

General Maxwell Day, who was with Graham, wondered aloud if Matlin might not be the man who had raided a Marine armory and taken a 3.5 rocket launcher and a quarter of a ton of ammunition for it.

Graham phoned Cora. "I'm checking a report," he said. "Would Steve have thought of utilizing Marine equipment?"

Cora answered carefully: "That weapon belonged to the people of the U.S., didn't it?"

"Yes."



GRAY MORROW

THE REPLICATORS

"Well, then, I think Steve would regard himself as part owner, as a citizen, and without any guilt since he would consider either that he paid for it with taxes or earned it in World War II."

Graham put his hand over the mouthpiece, said, "I gather he would have thought of such a thing."

The Marine officer held his hand out for the phone. "Let me talk to her," he said. A moment later: "Mrs. Matlin?"

"Yes?"

"May I ask you some very personal questions about your husband?"

"You may."

"Now, Mrs. Matlin, Mr. Graham here has the highest respect for your opinions, so think carefully about this one: Is your husband intelligent?"

Cora hesitated; then: "I know exactly what you mean. On some levels, no; on others, extremely intelligent."

"Is he brave?"

"To hear him talk, no. But my feeling is, totally. I think you'd have to engage his interest, though."

"What does he think of generals?"

"They're idiots."

"Is he an honest man?"

"We-l-l-l-l, that depends. For example, he had that rifle along that first day in the hope that he'd be able to kill a deer illegally."

"I mean is he responsible for his debts?"

"If I may quote him—he wouldn't give the so and so's the satisfaction of owing them money."

General Day smiled. "Now, Mrs.

Matlin, would you take your husband back if I made a sergeant out of him?"

"Why not a captain?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Matlin, if you'll think a little bit, you'll realize that he'd never sink that low."

"Oh, I don't have to think. You're right. Well—yes, I might take him back. B-but he's not in the Marines anymore."

"He will be, Mrs. Matlin. Good-by."

He hung up.

An hour later it was announced on TV, radio and the newspapers that Matlin had been re-inducted into the Marines, and that he was ordered to report to the nearest Marine station.

About midnight that night a jet, with Graham and several officers aboard, flew down to the Marine base where Matlin was resignedly waiting for them. They secured a Marine private's uniform. As the grim, unshaved man reluctantly donned it, they interrogated him. They were interested in any thought whatsoever that may have flitted through Matlin's mind for any reason.

Matlin objected: "That's crazy. I don't know anything special—except the thing is out to get me."

"We think you do."

"But that's a lot of—"

"Private Matlin! That's an order!"

Glumly—but thoroughly—Matlin complied with the orders. He told them everything that had passed through his mind about the creature in the past few days. And there had

been things, many things, things that had seemed crazy and distorted to him, until he thought he was beginning to lose his mind. Visions of a home on a planet of another star. Visions of long, long years of travel. Visions of the buried ship at the lake, where thousands of atomic bombs were in process of being duplicated.

His listeners turned pale, but Graham urged, "Go on."

Matlin continued: There was only one creature, but it had brought with it a number of spare bodies and could grow even more.

Then he stopped. "Damn it," he growled, "I don't like to say this stuff! Why do you want to hear it, anyway? It's just crazy dreams."

Graham glanced at the Marine commander, then at Matlin. He said, "Matlin, we don't think it's dreams at all. We think that you are in resonance—somehow!—with the creature's mind. And we need to know what it has in its mind—so, for heaven's sake, go on!"

The story, by the time Matlin got through piecing it together, made a pattern:

The alien had arrived in the solar system in two ships, with its bodies in various growth stages and evenly distributed between the two vessels. When one ship—and its cargo of bodies—was later destroyed, it made a duplicate, and now again had two.

As body after body was destroyed, the next in line was triggered into rapid growth and awakened to full adulthood in about two days. Each new body had the com-

plete "memory" of what had happened to the ones that preceded it; it automatically recorded by ESP everything that happened to its preceding self.

On arrival, the first body had awakened in a state of total receptiveness. It had wanted to be able to duplicate the thoughts and feelings of the inhabitants of this newly found planet.

—Be like them, think like them, know their language—

It was in this helpless, blank condition, when it stumbled on Steve Matlin.

And that was the story. The creature had been imprinted with the personality of Matlin.

Graham said, "Steve, do you realize that this being got all these destructive ideas from you?"

Matlin blinked. "Huh!"

Graham, remembering some things that Cora had told him, said, "Do you have any friends, Steve? Anybody you like? Anybody *anywhere*?"

Matlin could think of no one. Except, of course, Cora and the kids. But his feelings about them were not unmixed. She had insisted on sending the three older children to school in town. But he did feel a genuine affection for her, and them, at some level.

Graham said tensely, "That's why she's alive. That's why the creature didn't kill her the day it burned your farm."

"B-but—" Matlin protested, "why destroy the farm?"

"You hate the damn place, don't you?"

Matlin was silent. He'd said it a thousand times.

"What do you think we ought to do with about half the people in this country, Steve?"

"I think we ought to wipe the human race off the map and start over again," said Matlin automatically.

"What do you think we ought to do with the Russians?"

"If I had my way," said Matlin, "we'd go over there and plaster the whole of Asia with atomic bombs."

After a little, Graham said softly, "Like to change any of those ideas, Steve?"

Matlin, who had finished dressing, scowled into a mirror. "Look," he said finally, "you've got me where I can't hit back. And I'm ready to be loused up by what the idiot generals have got in their crazy noodles. So tell me what you want me to do."

At *that* precise moment, *That* ceased its feverish duplication of man's atomic bombs . . . and became itself.

Its compulsive mental tie with Matlin was severed.

Shuddering, *That* made a report, on an instantaneous relay-wave transmitter whose receiver was light-years away:

"What we always feared would happen on one of these blank mind approaches to a new planet finally happened to me. While I was enormously receptive to any thought, my first body was destroyed by a two-legged inhabitant of this system, a being with the most incredible ideas

—which are apparently due to some early mistreatment. This inability to slough off early shock conditioning seems to be a unique phenomenon of the people of this planet.

"Realizing how trapped I was while he remained alive, I made several attempts to kill him. I was unsuccessful in this because he turned out to be unexpectedly resourceful. But he has now put on a suit called a uniform, and this has immediately turned him into a peaceful person.

"Thus I was able to free myself. Naturally, I can still sense where he is, but he can no longer receive my thoughts nor I his. However, I must report that I am pinned down here by an air fleet. My image as a goodwill visitor has been completely nullified by what has happened. Obviously, I won't use any weapons against them; so perhaps this expedition is doomed."

A team of astronauts was sent up. The team successfully boarded *That's* second spaceship, reporting that it was occupied by four bodies in various growth stages.

Even as they blew up the ship in its silent orbit, on earth Matlin was driven to the edge of the lake. There, a government launch was provided him. While Graham and General Day watched through binoculars, Matlin drove the \$30,000 craft right onto the beach of the island, careless of any damage to it.

"I think he smashed the launch," said Graham.

"Good."

"Good?"

"My whole theory about him would collapse if he treated govern-

ment property with the same care that he gave his own possessions. It reassures me that he's exactly the man I thought."

Matlin came to where the second alien ship lay at the bottom of the blast pit. Water had filtered down into the clay. Having his orders, Matlin dutifully slid down into the goo. He held his rifle high, cursed, and started for the entrance.

VI

Graham, General Day, and an artillery major watched Matlin's progress on a portable TV. The picture was coming from a ship some 70,000 feet above the island. The scene below was crystal clear. Through the marvelous telescopic lens, Matlin actually looked like a tiny human being walking.

"But why send anyone?" Graham protested. "Why not just blast it? As you've already pointed out, we've got enough power up there—" he indicated the sky above — "to exterminate him."

General Day explained that he now favored Graham's earlier view. The alien might be able to defend itself.

"But it's too late for caution," Graham interjected. "We've burned our bridges."

It would be unwise, the Marine officer explained, to provoke the creature further until a confrontation had taken place.

"A confrontation between a super-being — and Matlin!"

"Who else should we send? Some poor devil? No, Matlin is oriented

to this. Seeing the creature face on is not a new experience to him as it would be to some other lower ranks."

"Why not send you? Me?"

Day answered in a steady voice that such decisions as were required here should not be made by people who reasoned on the basis of official attitudes.

"How do you think I got to be a general? When in doubt, I listened to what the men thought. They have a basic caninness that transcends intellect."

With an effort, Graham recovered. "You heard Matlin's basic truth," he said. "His opinion of the human race —"

General Day gave him a surprised look. "You mean to tell me that isn't your opinion also?"

"No."

"You don't think that human beings are absolutely impossible?"

"No, I think they're pretty terrific," said Graham.

"Boy, are you far gone," said the general in a tolerant voice. "I can see that we Marines have an understanding of human behavior that beats all you brain-washed people." He broke off. "Matlin was badly handled in World War II."

"What?" Graham gaped.

"You ask, what has that got to do with it? Plenty. You see, Mr. Graham, you have to understand that a true Marine is a king. Now, Matlin is the true Marine type. But he was treated like an ordinary private. He never got over it; so he's been seething for 20 years, waiting for recognition. I'm giving

it to him. A king Marine, Mr. Graham, can direct a war, take command of a city, or negotiate with a foreign power like a government. Marines who get to be generals are considered sub-level versions of this species. All Marines understand this perfectly. It will not occur to Matlin to consult me, or you, or the U.S. Government. He'll size up the situation, make a decision, and I shall back him up."

He turned to the major, commanded, "All right, start firing!"

"Firing!" Graham yelled.

Day explained patiently as to a child that it was necessary in this extreme emergency to reindoctrinate this particular Marine, and grind in the simple truth — to him — that generals always loused things up. "A quick reminder, that's all, Mr. Graham."

Matlin was still skidding around in the mud when the first shell landed to his left. It sprayed him with fine droplets of wet dirt. The second shell landed to his right. The debris from it missed him entirely, but he was now in such state of rage that he didn't notice.

By the time the shelling ceased, his anger was gone and he was in that peculiar state of mind which can only be described with one word: Marine.

The man who presently entered the alien ship knew that life was tough, that other people could not be trusted, that no one cared about him. It was a truth he had always fought with bitterness and rage.

But there was no longer any

doubt in his mind. People were what they were. They would shoot you in the back if they couldn't get you from in front.

Understanding this, you could be friendly with them, shake their hands, enjoy their company — and be completely free of any need to judge them or condemn them.

But you were on your own, day and night, year in and out.

As he saw the creature, Matlin used his gun for the purpose that he had brought it. Deliberately, he tossed it down. It struck the metal floor with a clatter.

The echoes of the sound faded — and there was silence. Alien and human stood there staring.

Matlin waited.

Suddenly, the hoped-for voice came from a speaker in the ceiling:

"I am talking to you through a computer, which is translating my thoughts into your language. It will do the same for yours. Why have they sent you to me — the one man I threatened to kill?"

That added: "I no longer plan to kill you. So you may talk freely."

Matlin said bluntly, "We're trying to decide what to do with you. Do you have any suggestions?"

"I wish to leave the planet forever. Can you arrange it?"

Matlin was practical. Could the creature leave whether human beings like it or not? "No."

The simple negative took Matlin slightly aback. "You have no special weapons from — from where you come from?"

"None," admitted the alien.

That admission also startled Matlin. "You mean to tell me we can do what we want with you? You can't stop us?"

"Yes, except —"

Matlin wanted to know except what?

The great eyes blinked at him, its black, fold-like eyelids rolling up and down in a skin and muscle complex unlike that of any creature Matlin had ever seen before.

"Except that it will do you no good to kill me."

"You'd better make damn clear what you mean," Matlin said.

Watching him, *That* gave its explanation.

And Matlin realized that what *That* said was true. For once in the history of the human race, killing an enemy would solve nothing.

Matlin's boat was almost waterlogged by the time he successfully beached it near where Graham and the others were waiting.

He came up to them and saluted. General Day returned the salute smartly, and said: "Your report."

"I told him he could go," said Matlin. "He'll be leaving when I signal."

"*What?*" That was Graham, his voice sounding shrill and amazed in his own ears. "But why?"

"Never mind why," said General Day. "That's the way it's going to be."

He spoke into his mike: "Men, this alien ship is going to lift from

here in a few minutes. Let it go through. A duly authorized person has negotiated this solution."

The language was not clear to Matlin. "Is it okay?" he asked questioningly.

For an instant, it seemed to Graham, Day hesitated. Graham said urgently into that instant: "At least, you're going to find out what made him agree?"

Day seemed to have come to a decision; his momentary hesitation ended. "Okay!" he said to Matlin. "Okay, sergeant."

Matlin raised his rifle, and fired it into the air.

To Graham, Day said, "I've never lost a bet on a king Marine, and I don't expect to now."

The interchange ended. For on the island, the ship was lifting.

Silent, jetless, rocketless power drove it up on a slant.

It passed over their heads, gathering speed. It grew small and, as they watched, became a dot and vanished.

Aboard it, the creature to which Matlin had talked performed the preliminaries necessary to an interstellar voyage, and then retired to one of the sleep boxes. Soon it was in a state of suspended animation. . .

Thereupon happened what the monster had told Matlin — the underlying reality, which made it useless, unnecessary, even dangerous, to destroy it and its vessel.

On a planet many light-years away, the real *That* stirred, awoken and sat up.

END



REPORTER AT LARGE

BY RON GOULART

**Nothing can withstand the
power of the press—even
when it's robot-directed!**

It was a sensational front page. The four-color headline had punch, the atrocity photo had a pretty girl in it, the comic strip was surefire and the crossword puzzle was just difficult enough.

"Same old slop," said Dave Romero, tilting back in his swivel chair and spreading the proof out on his desk. "I've been editor of the *Territory Eight Press-Guardian* for five months and I've never written a word."

His assistant, a tall heavysset young man named Merle Bockman, said, "So complain to Commander Vetterlein. He's supposed to be staying at his suite in the Territory Eight Patriotic Arms Hotel this week."

Commander G. B. Vetterlein

owned forty-seven newspapers on Barnum and eighty-three on other planets. Everything that appeared in the *Press-Guardian* came from his news and feature syndicates. As editor, Dave's main function was making up the paper and getting everything to fit into eight pages. "What's a six-letter word for scoundrel?" he asked Bockman.

"Batson," replied his assistant.

"Who's this guy in our first comic strip remind you of? This fellow here who seems to be deflowering the heroine between panels?"

Not looking, Bockman said, "Batson."

Dave nodded, his dark face lining as he frowned. He read the headline aloud again. "'Batson Lies,

Avers Plexus Spokesman'. Subhead: 'No Famine In Territory Nine'."

"Did you read Little Crippled Sally today?"

"Yeah, where she tells her uncle that starvation is usually only psychosomatic. Sure."

Bockman moved toward the press room "I have a hunch that Plexus Enterprises is pulling a fast one with those surplus food warehouses."

"All I know is what I print in the paper," said Dave. "Go ahead. Tell those automatic bastards to roll. It's after ten and we've got to be on the stands by noon."

Cupping his hands Bockman yelled, "Let'er roll!" at the fully automated press room. The presses roared and he slid the door shut to cut off some of the whirl. "I wonder what Leopoldo Batson's really like."

"Let's suggest that to Commander Vetterlein for tomorrow's Inquiring Reporter question," said Dave, still frowning at the front page.

Leopoldo Batson had seized control of the key cities in the neighboring Territory Nine some six months before. He still didn't have complete authority, and one of his big problems was the Plexus Food Enterprises Company. Plexus had been paid a fee by four of the previous governments to stockpile a certain amount of food from the many crops and meats that they grew, processed and packaged. Now that a famine had actually hit Territory Nine the surplus storehouses proved to be just about empty.

There were rumors that Plexus

had shifted products to other warehouses, but they claimed spoilage and acts of god. None of this appeared in the *Press-Guardian*, since there was a strong possibility that Commander Vetterlein was a major shareholder in Plexus Enterprises. Whatever his motives, the commander seemed determined to use his papers to do in Leopoldo Batson. Even his papers here in Territory Eight.

"By the way," said Bockman.

"Yeah?"

"Something was delivered while you were out at coffee. I put it back in the cloak room."

"What is it?"

"A big crate, comes from the Vett Syndicate storerooms in the capital at Keystone."

"Are we supposed to open it?"

"Nothing came with the crate," said Bockman, nodding his head toward the back room of the newspaper offices. "It's addressed to you and that's all I know."

Dave stood up. "We'll investigate."

A blue light flashed over Dave's desk.

"Message," said Bockman.

"Blue," said Dave, dropping back into his chair. "Blue's the damned commander's color." He swung his forefinger against the response toggle and said, "David W. Romero."

"Stand easy," said a rich falsetto voice. On the view screen next to Dave's outdrop tube appeared the long sharp face of a pale, gray-haired man. "Commander Vetterlein here. How's it going, David?"

"Fine, sir," he said smartly.

"I'd like to see you here at my suite in one half of an hour," said the commander and faded out.

Dave stood up again. "Oh, boy."

"It could be a raise," said Bockman.

"No, no," said Dave. "Raises come out of the payhole there. But an in-person talk with the commander. That's something else again."

"Shall I open the crate while you're gone?"

"Yes," said Dave, heading for the door. "I may want to use it."

Commander Vetterlein laughed like a squeezed rubber doll. A tear appeared at the corner of one of his pale eyes and he clapped his hands on his knees. "Isn't that a scheme to admire?" he asked Dave.

The parlor of the suite was some fifty feet long with two bright, all-glass walls. The solid walls were decorated with neat rows of flags. The flags of the various territories, condominiums, nations and kingdoms where the commander had papers. Dave was looking at the flags and not at his chief. "Yes, sir."

"You're admiring my flag collection?"

"Yes, sir."

"The flag of one's country," said the commander's piping voice, "brings tears to one's eyes and elation to one's heart. You can well understand that, being a citizen of so many places and planets, I can sometimes sit here for hours crying and being elated."

"Yes, I can understand that."

"Now then," said Vetterlein, "to return to the details of your special mission. You will leave tonight, in a plain unmarked land car, and proceed to Territory Nine. Reservations have been made for you at the Esperanza Inn — under your own name, since we want no charges of scheming."

"And the Esperanza Inn is near this chateau?"

"Exactly," said the commander, smiling. "The cold stone chateau wherein an unsullied fairhaired young woman is being held prisoner and used for an uncountable number of vile purposes by Leopoldo Batson, the so-called liberator of Territory Nine."

Dave checked his notebook. "Her name is Patricia Haysen and she's the daughter of the former Prime Minister."

"Right. Of old Gaylord J. Haysen himself, the territory's leading warehouse rental agent and a keen politician." The commander picked a folder from the jade-top table in front of his knees. "Here we have pictures of the girl. Bathing suit shot, formal dress, disheveled. We'll want to run them all. More important are the pictures you'll get of the guards doing her injustices and shots of her being freed and so on."

Dave took the photos. Patricia Haysen was a blonde girl in her early twenties, pretty and slender, looking somewhat reluctant. "She's expecting the rescue?"

"Her father has arranged it. Rented the chateau under a name

that's pretty close to Batson," explained the commander. "Haysen has also seen to it that two defected Batson men will be on guard there. They will be easily overpowered."

"Good," said Dave, since he would be doing the overpowering.

"It's going to be a big story," said Commander Vetterlein. "It's certain to look real if handled properly. Then it will damage Batson. After all, nobody wants a seducer for a president."

"No, sir," agreed Dave.

"I have picked you, David, because I want the story to break in this territory, outside of Batson's stamping grounds. That will also make the rescue seem more daring." The commander chuckled. "After you succeed with this, David, other plums will come your way."

"I'm glad to do it," said Dave.

"I'm sure my assistant can run the paper while I'm gone."

Slipping the pictures of the Haysen girl away Vetterlein said, "I've made certain that the *Press-Guardian* will function smoothly. On direct order from me, our Keystone store-rooms have sent you an android."

"Beg pardon?"

"Over the years, we've experimented with the use of robot editors. They don't have the fire and drive of real flesh-and-blood fellows like yourself but they do function efficiently," the commander said, "I have quite an interest in this type of android. I have even bought up large quantities of those used on far remote planets. Some of my

android editors in the collection are well over two centuries old." He laughed. "Don't frown, David. The one you've got is brand new and ready to go. The latest model. Let's hope it doesn't prove too good, eh now?"

So that's what was in the crate! "Right, sir," said Dave, trying not to frown.

Merle Bockman, his arms folded, was standing in the middle of the editorial room. His head was tilted slightly to the left and his straight brown hair was hanging at an odd angle. As Dave came in he said, "Hello, chief."

"Open the crate yet?"

"Halfway. Then I stopped."

"It's supposed to be my temporary replacement," said Dave.

"They come packed in excelsior now?"

"It's an android."

"Oh," said Bockman. "That's okay. I thought somebody was trying to give us a scoop on a trunk murder." He shook his head. "Why do you need a replacement?"

Dave told him about his assignment to go into the next territory and pretend to rescue Patricia Haysen. "Let's get this brand new efficient editor unpacked. I've got to leave in a couple of hours."

"I thought," said Bockman, following Dave to the cloakroom, "that I'd get to run the *Press-Guardian* when you had to leave."

"So did I. But you don't seem to be one of the commander's hobbies."

The crate lid was still down but

most of the nails had been pulled. "I stopped when I saw the feet." said Bockman.

Dave grabbed the lid and swung it up. "What the hell?" On top of the excelsior rested a box of cigars. Dave lifted it out and started scooping the excelsior away.

Something started whirring and buzzing, and then the android suddenly sat up. He looked like a heavy middle-aged man. He had a speckled complexion and a thick beligerent lower lip. Pulled down on his wide forehead was a green eyeshade. He scowled at Dave. "You, Junior! Who are you?"

"Dave Romero. You're going to be running the paper here during the day or so that I'm gone."

"Give me my damn cigars," said the android, grabbed the box of cigars from Dave and jumped out of the crate. Glaring at Bockman the android said. "You! Who are you?"

"Merle Bockman."

"Merle? That's great. They give me a wall-eyed greenhorn named Merle and an undersized Romero and think I'm going to put out a paper worth reading!"

Dave glanced down into the crate and saw a bill of lading. He reached for it. "Now that you know us, who the hell are you?"

"My name," said the android, "is Howey-632." He thumbed open the cigar box. "And I'm too damn good a city editor to be stuck with an operation like this."

The slip in Dave's hand read:
"Enclosed find one (1) automatic

editor. His name is Maximo-87 and to operate him simply push button marked *edit.*" To Howey-632, Dave said, "It says here you're supposed to be Maximo-87."

Howey-632 laughed and lit his cigar with a wood match. "A lot they know! I'll tell you, Dave. I've been on the shelf for a time. They prefer those new pansy andies but I knew I'd get a crack at a paper again. I'm going to put this sheet on its feet. What's its name?"

"The *Press-Guardian*," said Dave. "I think, though, that you've been sent to us by mistake."

Howey exhaled smoke. "You needed a city editor. I'm it. Show me my desk."

"Merle," said Dave, "you stay here and fill Howey in. I want to make a call."

Dave ran to his desk and dialed the Patriotic Arms. He couldn't get through to the commander and had to talk to the image of his general secretary, a fat man named Brubecker.

"Aren't you enroute yet, David?" asked Brubecker.

"It's about the android editor," said Dave. "They sent us the wrong one and . . ."

"David. Mistakes just aren't made where the commander's hobbies are concerned." Brubecker puckered his lips. "Don't be a spoilsport about turning over the reins. It is, after all, only for a couple of days at most." Then he was gone.

"Junior," called Howey-632, "you're sitting in my slot. Now. First off I want to read a few

copies of this rag and then I want to go out and nose around this town and see what's going on." He came up and patted Dave on the back. "Where do you keep your bottle?"

"You drink, too?"

"I was built to do everything a good editor is supposed to do," said Howey-632.

"Third drawer on the left," said Dave. He gave up his swivel chair and looked back at Bockman. "I'll see you in a day or so with a big story."

Bockman didn't speak.

Dave traveled back roads and little used roadways in the gray land car the Vett Syndicate had provided him.

It was nearly twilight now and he'd been driving since morning. He had left Territory Eight last night, driven several hours and then pulled off the road and slept a few hours. He crossed over into Territory Nine a little after sunrise.

The roads Commander Vetterlein had mapped out for him to take to the chateau were so out of the way that Dave hadn't had a chance to pick up a copy of today's *Press-Guardian*. He hoped Howey-632's first issue was up to standard. Well, that was the commander's problem — or his general secretary's.

Since Dave had come to Barnum to work on the *Press-Guardian* he had done what he was told. He didn't agree with Commander Vetterlein's approach or with most of his ideas. But Dave was anxious to make good on this job. He was

twenty-seven now and he'd already screwed up a couple of good jobs. This time he'd keep quiet and follow orders. He had been here five months and had no trouble. He'd even received a raise.

The country around him now was dry and nearly flat. No grass, few trees. Hard orange and yellow land and low, brown, rocky hills. There was a wind and it snapped thin clouds of dust up into the thin blue sky. Dust spattered at the car windows, along with swarms of suicidal green gnats.

He found the sideroad that led to the chateau and turned onto it. Gradually a forest grew up around him. When the road finally dead-ended against a high stone wall there seemed to be tall, tangled trees everywhere behind him.

Dave went over his map again and then gathered up his cameras and his stun pistol and got out of the car. It was a step up in the organization to be chosen for a non-sitting assignment like this. Even so, Dave felt uneasy. You couldn't tell how realistic things might get in a mock rescue.

The narrow break in the wall was where it was supposed to be. Dave shoved his gear through and then edged through himself.

There was the chateau. A large yellowstone building, some thirty yards from where he stood. Dave uncased a camera and took a few steps toward the place.

Something showed at a second floor window. Something white was being waved.

"Don't surrender till I get a few pictures," Dave called.

A girl's voice called something back and then the white was gone. A moment later a ground floor side door opened and a slim blonde girl ran from the chateau waving a large white sheet of paper. ". . . can forget it," she was saying.

Dave hurried toward her. "Since I'm alone you'll have to take some of the pictures when I tangle with the guards. Where are they anyway?"

"They got upset and took off," the girl said. "You are the man from the *Press-Guardian*, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well," the girl said, "then you should have seen this. I was just packing when I glanced out and saw you sneaking up." What she was holding was a copy of the *Press-Guardian*.

"Today's?" asked Dave, taking it. "I haven't seen it yet."

"A runner brought it just awhile ago. I don't imagine Commander Vetterlein can be too happy."

Swallowing, Dave made himself look at the front page. The headline read: Plexus Plans Frameup! Then the subheads: News Magnate Linked With Crooked Food Company In Move To Smear Batson! Press-Guardian Refuses To Play Ball And Tells All!

The accompanying stories were more of the same. "He even threw out all the comics," said Dave, leafing through the paper. "But left my name on the masthead."

"He?"

"Howey-632," mumbled Dave. Howey really was a good newsman. In his few hours as acting editor he'd gone out and dug up the whole story about the setup in Territory Eight. It probably didn't take that much digging. Dave knew most of what Howey had used in his expose. He just hadn't been able to use it in print. "You see, they delivered the wrong android to take my place."

"Can you explain while I pack?" asked the girl. "I don't feel like staying on at the chateau now. I told my father this whole foolishness just couldn't be made to work. He and the commander cooked it up — and so it had to be tried."

"You are Patricia Haysen, then?"

"Why else would I be involved in this mishmash? Come on!"

They went into the chateau and Dave explained to her just exactly how Howey-632 had ruined his career for him.

Brown fog began to fill in the spaces between the clumps of trees. Patricia Haysen made herself more compact on the car seat and said, "I'm sorry none of the communications at the chateau were connected. My father didn't think it was worth the expense since we'd only be using the place for a few days. Do you really want to call your paper?"

Dave slowed the car as the weather thickened. "Eventually. If only to tell them what to do with the stuff in my desk."

"Maybe Commander Vetterlein

will forgive," began the girl. "No. He's not likely to, is he?"

"Nope."

"You're sure you don't want to head back to your own territory tonight? You don't have to transport me home."

"I want to postpone the trip until tomorrow," said Dave. "By now somebody must have stopped Howey-632."

"Of course," said Patricia. "You can count on the commander."

"I was trying to hold onto this job with the *Press-Guardian*."

"Don't apologize for not telling the truth in the paper. You'd have been stopped anyway."

"I hate to think of an android having more nerve than me."

"They build some of them that way," said the girl. She bobbed up suddenly. "That's no fog there!"

Dave braked. About 100 feet ahead of them was a black truck, swung across the road. Five uniformed men were standing in front of it, casually aiming blaster rifles down the road. "Would those guys be some of Leopoldo Batson's troops?"

"Now that you mention it," said Patricia, "that short man with the curly gray hair is Leopoldo Batson himself."

"The range of those rifles is two to three hundred feet. I guess we'd better surrender." He killed the motor.

"Want to take some pictures of them first?"

Dave frowned at her and stepped out of the car. "Good evening."

"Name, please?" asked one of the approaching men.

"I'm Dave Romero from Territory Eight."

Batson clapped his hands together and laughed. "My friend!" he came running for Dave. "A man of great courage."

While Batson embraced him Dave said, "You were expecting me?"

"Yes," said Batson. "We learned that you were registered at the Esperanza Inn and after we read today's *Press-Guardian* we knew you had come here to our territory for but one purpose. Am I right?"

"Well, yes," said Dave, watching Patricia climb to the road.

"How were you able to wrest control away from Commander Vetterlein? Will you continue?"

"I hope so."

"Enough talk," said Batson. "We came to the inn with an invitation for you. You had not arrived and we set out to watch the roads for some sign of you." His head jerked. "Who is that girl?"

"I'm Patricia Haysen. You know me, don't you, Mr. Batson?"

"I know your corrupt father."

"Miss Haysen," said Dave, "Miss Haysen provided me with a great deal of information. She's on our side, Batson."

"Coming from the heroic editor of the *Press-Guardian* that's recommendation enough," said Batson, embracing them both.

"What sort of invitation did you have in mind?" asked Dave.

"I know you'll want to cover it," said Batson. "We have at last obtained accurate information concerning the Plexus Food Enterprises manipulations of the surplus food supplies. We have found the actual locations of the hidden warehouses where the food is really kept before it is sold secretly to wholesalers in other territories."

"The stuff didn't spoil then?"

"No," said Batson. "Plexus juggled books and records to make it look that way. A good scheme for selling the same goods twice, once to the government and once to private parties." He clasped Dave's arm. "So I invite you to accompany us on tonight's raid."

"Tonight?" said Dave. "Right now?"

"We strike at midnight," said Batson. "You should get enough material for a whole edition. Plus pictures."

Dave nodded finally. "Okay." He looked toward Patricia.

"I'll come along, too, if I may," she said.

"You're on our side now," said Batson. "You're welcome."

Batson embraced them both and then they started off on the raid.

The office of the *Press-Guardian* was quiet. It was early morning and Dave stood in the doorway with the still, blue morning behind him.

"Bockman?" he said. He waited and then entered and crossed to his desk.

Sitting on top of it, under a half-empty box of cigars, was a copy of

yesterday's paper. Dave had spent all yesterday afternoon and evening driving back and he had again not seen the *Press-Guardian* at all. He lifted aside Howey-632's cigars and looked down at the front page. As he had expected all the expose was retracted and a sabotage plot charged against Batson and his followers. There was no mention of Howey-632.

Dave walked back to the cloak room and peered in. The crate was there with the lid on but not nailed shut. Dave lifted it and then let it drop. Howey-632 had been dismantled and tossed into the excelsior and the lid jammed down to make the pieces fit.

Dave went again to his desk. Bockman was just coming in to the office. "Hello, Merle."

Bockman said, "All is forgiven — in case you were worried."

"Oh?"

"The commander called me personally. He said now and then a mistake gets made, and this time someone in his organization slipped up and sent us a crusading editor from his private collection and not a new efficient model. A few firings were made and the incident is officially over."

"That's fine."

"It was a good issue I thought," said Bockman. "Although I had to pretend that Howey-632 went berserk and locked me in the cloak room when I protested and that I didn't get out until it was too late to stop the paper."

"Who dismantled him?"

"The commander sent over some guys." Bockman lowered his head. "Have any trouble over in Nine?"

"No," said Dave. "I'm a hero over there because they think I put out that issue. I met Leopoldo Batson and went on a midnight raid with him."

"A raid?"

"We found the warehouses where Plexus had stored the food supplies they'd swindled the government out of. Then yesterday morning I went along while some of the food was distributed. There really are a lot of hungry people over there."

"I figured," said Bockman. "What about Haysen's daughter? That's the only problem that's still bothering Commander Vetterlein. Her father called him and said she never came back from the chateau. Commander will be asking you about her."

"Patricia got fed up with her

father. She's on the other side now. I left her over in the capital yesterday."

Bockman put his hands in his pockets. "Shall we get going on the makeup? The Syndicate's been outdoing itself on anti-Batson."

Dave took a cigar from the box. "Today's issue is going to be devoted to the raid on the Plexus warehouses and to the famine. With text and pictures by your editor."

Bockman said, "And tomorrow's paper?"

"I imagine it will be another retraction," said Dave. "If possible I should be back in the capital of Territory Nine by sometime tonight." He lit the cigar. "Before I go, though, I want to do an expose on my own. You can say I locked you in the cloakroom."

"To hell with that," said Bockman, "pass the cigars!" **END**

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SMALL ONE

by E. CLAYTON McCARTY

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

***The creature from space
was tiny but dangerous.
In fact, it was a Man!***

I

He had taken refuge deep in a cavern when the fiery object sped across the horizon and dropped straight toward the center of his praying circle. He had watched it settle, its flames fusing rock and clay, watched the cherry red surface of the object turn gray as it cooled.

Until then he had not thought of it as some kind of vehicle bearing a living being. Even when an open-

ing appeared and a creature climbed to the ground his sensation was one of shocked inability to accept the picture his eyes held. He had never seen a living thing so small. The creature was hardly larger than a branch from one of the desert shrubs that surrounded the praying circle.

He lay in the cavern's darkness, frozen in breathless rigidity, watching with hypnotic fascination as the creature began to move about. He tried to still the excited quivering

of his muscles, lest some emanation from them might turn the visitor's attention toward him; he had no way of knowing what senses the creature possessed. He was known among his Ceremonial Family as The Small One — not yet quite adolescent, and tiny for his age. He blinked hard and suppressed a whimper, fearful that he faced a problem much larger than he could be expected to handle alone.

He could lie hidden in the cave's darkness and yet see clearly every inch of the fantastic, arid landscape around his prayer circle through a narrow slit in the wall. This gradually helped to quiet his racing blood. It was then that Small One began to sense waves of emotion flowing from the stranger. He thought, "This thing has a mind," and found some of his fears draining away.

He could begin to think, without too much apprehension, of trying to establish some means of communicating with the alien being. But suddenly tension returned. The stranger had discovered his cave mouth and was moving toward it.

Frantically Small One concentrated upon learning why the creature seemed bent upon entering that black hole. But the alien mind was murky. Its thoughts took only vague shapes. Small One probed for signs of intended violence, but he found only curiosity, mingled with a confusion of half-formed ideas, among which was a primitive sort of wariness and cautious distrust of dark places.

The stranger crept into the cave.

Small One could hear the intruder stumbling about in the gloom.

From the ledge upon which he lay, Small One could watch a rather incomplete exploration back about a hundred feet into the tunnel. By the manner of the visitor's movement Small One realized that possibly the creature possessed eyes that became blinded by darkness. He seemed to have no secondary senses to compensate. The stranger came forward toward the light again, and Small One could see that wariness had slipped from him and could sense dimly that a feeling of shelter and safety had taken its place. He thought of letting the stranger know that his probing hands had passed near a Wist, but caution kept Small One lying hidden upon his ledge. He memorized carefully, however, the crevice in which the Wist lay, for when night's cold swept away day's blazing desert heat that Wist would lose its torpor. Then it would crawl about in search of flesh it might sting into a living-death paralysis and use as an incubator to receive and nourish its eggs. Before that time older members of The Small One's Family must come and destroy the Wist.

The stranger was moving again. He started to explore an area of the desert within sight of his ship, examining sparse plant life, stopping at intervals to survey at some length far-away features of landscape through an object he held up before his eyes. Small One guessed it to be some mechanical means for increasing the creature's powers of

vision. On one circle back to his ship the visitor's feet kicked into a pile of crystals. They were bright bits that The Small One found on occasions shining from stream beds or lying in the rubble of erosion on mesas beyond the great pine forests. The Small One had brought them with him to his vigil, for he was still very young. Even though he had embarked upon the first of the five ceremonial stages of Thinking Alone, which were the steps from childhood to the wisdom of an adult, The Small One had felt afraid to sit in the loneliness of his prayer circle without companionship of his toys. He was ashamed now that this strange being had discovered his secret and would know how much of the baby still lurked within him.

But the stranger seemed wildly excited by the discovery. He laid down a tube-like object which he had carried with great care all this time, scooped up a handful of crystals and rushed with them to relatively cooler air just inside the cave to examine them. He turned them over and over in his hands — ruby red ones, clear glass-like ones which scintillated with sparkling brightness deep in their hearts even in the filtered light of the cavern mouth.

Small One caught from the creature's mind sensations of tremendous satisfaction. There were vague images of richness, of yellow hair, of a pale throat around which a string of the crystals sparkled — pictures piling up kaleidoscopically, so fast that the patterns became

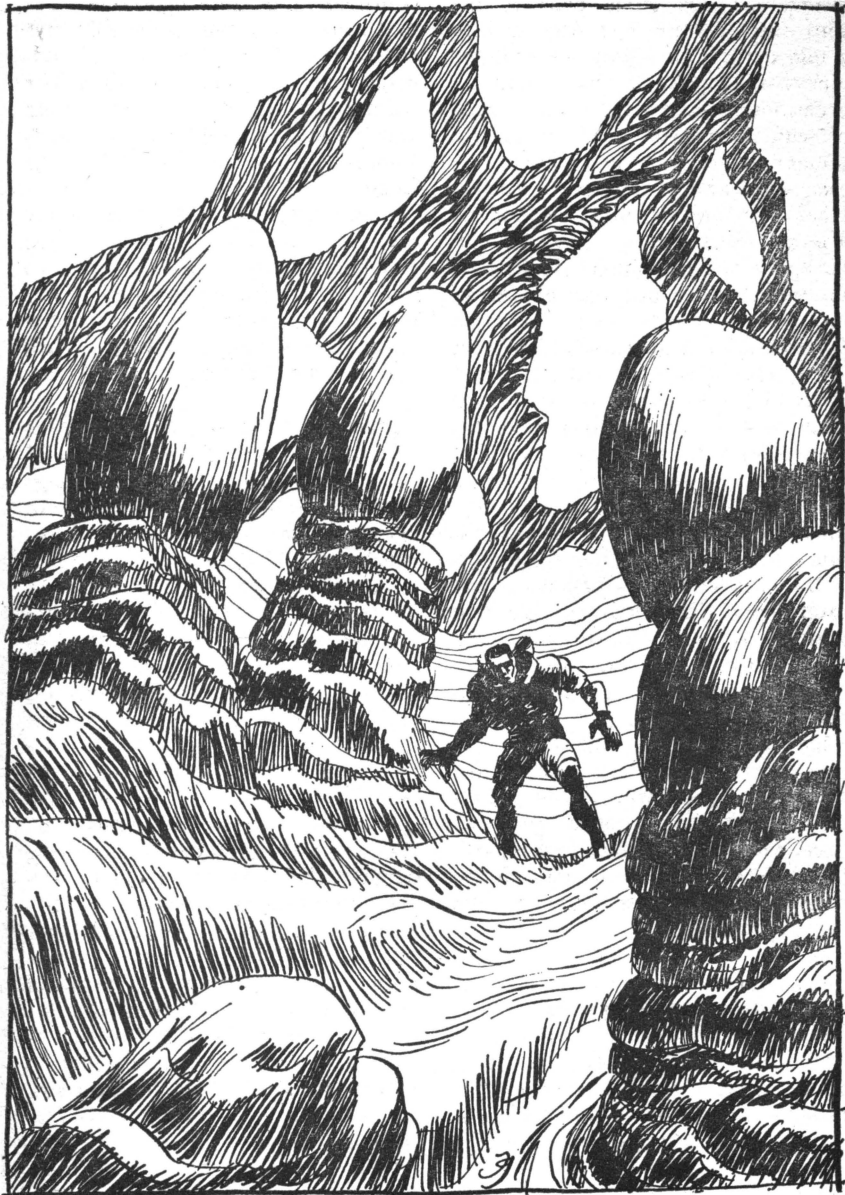
confused and unrecognizable. But that evident joy over some silly toys caused The Small One to feel suddenly a strong bond of kinship. The warmth of desiring understanding and friendliness crept into his mind. Impulsively he moved from his ledge.

Small One was not prepared for such an explosion of terror as that which thundered from the stranger's mind. The creature whirled, froze for an instant with face a twisted mask, then sprang backward toward the cavern's darkness.

Terror lashed at The Small One like uncontrollable whips of energy. He sensed a fearsome image of himself — a gigantic head with blazing green eyes and saber-like teeth — flooding the stranger's mind. He caught impressions of a desire to flee, of a wish for that metal tube which the stranger had laid upon the sands and forgotten in the excitement of finding his crystals, of a hopeless resignation to death.

The ledge upon which The Small One had hidden was directly over the cave's entrance. He sensed that the mere act of suddenly appearing between the stranger and that doorway enlarged the creature's fright. To allay this fear The Small One stepped to one side and left the tunnel opening free. Yet the stranger continued to back farther into the cavern depths, wedging himself finally in a crevice where he seemed to feel himself hidden by darkness.

The Small One spent some moments wishing he could have ad-



vanced through even one or two more of the stages of Thinking Alone, for he felt very young in the face of this problem. He had never known of a living thing on his world that experienced the terrible fear he saw in this creature huddled in the dark crevice. Perhaps the Wise Ones might have some understanding of it, but such insight would not belong to Small One until the fifth stage.

He felt intuitively that this visitor from the skies possessed a degree of intelligence. He caught vague and completely alien impressions from that mind: the tube lying out on the sands would be used to kill Small One if opportunity presented itself to possess it; much of the fear lying like a mist over the creature's mind centered in certainty that only moments stood between it and death under the fangs of a wild beast hungering for food.

The idea was so preposterous! The Small One would have laughed aloud if his thoughts had not been flooded with pity for the cowering creature. In his young way he hoped the stranger possessed intelligence of a degree high enough to allow some means of communication to be established between them. He built images of friendship, of peaceful intention, of helpfulness, of frank curiosity . . . but faced finally a realization that the pathways through the creature's mind were clouded. Any pictures that might find their way along them would be dim and possibly unrecognized. He tried then a visual presentation, holding his arms wide in the gesture of wel-

coming a brother from another Ceremonial Family. When no response followed, he stood tall, in the aloof posture of a strange one waiting politely to be noticed and invited to confer.

He went closer and repeated these rhythmic signs, but got no response. He began to feel completely helpless and childish in the face of this problem. He thought for a while of calling for his Family's Tutor, but he was ashamed to confess that he might still be too young to have been sent out to his first stage of Thinking Alone.

It occurred to Small One that the stranger's eyes might be of a relatively primitive type that could not receive impressions through darkness, and so he willed light to come into the cave.

The creature's wild scream at first clear sight of The Small One hurled itself far down passages, deep into the cavern in repeated waves of echoes. Small One had to close his own mind a moment to bring his senses back into harmony, for that cry sliced like a spear into his wide-open ears. He backed away from the crevice so that the stranger might not feel himself imprisoned there. Then he repeated again, for eyes that could now see, the ceremonial greetings he had used in darkness — the aloofness of one wishing to be noticed, the wide-opened arms of welcoming a brother from another Family. But each movement seemed to drive the visitor into a wilder frenzy of fear emotions.

The Small One probed and found

that his movements were being misinterpreted as threats. He held himself still for a time, hoping to calm the stranger's terror. He searched his own mind for some means by which he might establish communication and reassure the creature.

He wished with the self-pity of the very young, for that close, secure contact that only yesterday had bound his mind in complete unity with his Tutor's. He wept inside, for he knew that his first step over the threshold toward the Coming of Age had severed that tie forever.

The Small One labored hard at his problem, but the only possibility he could think of was to perform a ritual of ultimate friendship rarely used outside one's Ceremonial Family, the Ritual of Trust — to lie on his back and wave his feet helplessly in the air, exposing his vulnerable belly.

This he did, over and over, crawling a little closer each time until he could almost feel the creature's panting breath stir the air between them. He lay quiet then, hoping this being might eventually conquer fear and perform his own proper part of the ritual.

It occurred to The Small One that an alien culture might not have instructed its members in proper responses to the ritual. So he invited the creature in pantomime, showing the routine of making a stabbing motion with empty hands to complete acknowledgement and acceptance of proffered trust. He lay there patiently, repeating the pantomime at intervals. In time The Small

One sensed a lessening of the pounding force of fear waves between them and an alert wariness gradually taking their place.

The stranger began making noises — modulated sound which must be a language. Small One concentrated upon storing every syllable in the memory area of his mind. There was a tune and a pattern: "You're an ugly monster. You could tear me out of this crack without half trying. Why don't you? What's stopping you? What's with this rolling over on your back like that? When my dog does that he's either done something he knows I'll whip him for, or he wants his tummy scratched. Is that what you're trying? Or do you figure on tricking me into coming out from behind this rock so you can snap me up without having to dig me out? I wouldn't make a good-sized bite for you. You couldn't even feel me go down that gullet of yours. If you weren't so damned big I'd swear you were trying to make friends. Well, nothing doing, Pal; you won't get me that way. I'm staying right here. It's your move, Big Boy. What do you intend to do next?"

Small One lay almost breathlessly still, fearful that any further approach might destroy the tentative calm that had settled between them. Time's pulse beat out the slow, monotonous rhythm of the first sun's climb to its zenith and into the dawning of the red sun. Small One found his concentration weakening. It became increasingly difficult to hold light within the cavern.

And then a suffusion of joy pour-

ed from Small One's neck glands, for the stranger stretched an arm out from his hiding place.

Modulated sound again came from the creature's mouth: "Wish I knew what was going around in that great big head of yours, Pal. I can't stand much more in this crevice; my feet won't take it. You could get me anyhow. Might as well take a chance and come out. Get it over with. If you were as small as my dog I know what I'd do to that big tummy of yours. All right, Comrade, I'm coming out. Will that start your saliva glands working, or will it make your heart beat in anticipation of a kind word — like Shep's? Your eyes just don't look as liquid and loving as his. Wish I knew!"

Then a foot edged from the crevice — and in a moment the creature stood outside.

Small One did not dare turn his eyes to see better. He feared the thing might dart back into hiding at a movement even that imperceptible. The thing took one more step — and another, until it stood close to The Small One. From the corners of his eyes Small One saw the creature stretch on tip-toe, saw it reach upward toward his belly. But then, instead of an empty-handed stabbing motion which he expected as completion of the offer of Ultimate Friendship, Small One felt the stranger's fingers scratching and patting. Modulated sound accompanied the action: "There now, what do you say to that, old fellow? You're a whale of a lot bigger than Shep, but I guess you must be

somebody's pet. How does that feel, Old Boy? Are we friends now?"

But The Small One did not indulge himself too long in surprise reactions to any change this visitor had made in the ceremony. It was clear that the stranger had not been bred in a society which lived in accordance with civilized customs of The Ceremonial Families. Failure to complete the prescribed ritual properly meant, then, not boorishness but inheritance of a culture different from that of The Families.

The miracle of it struck Small One with such impact that he, to his full height, assumed the ceremonial pose and began to sing the song of Joyful Brotherhood. He sang for some moments before he realized the mistake he had made.

II

The stranger had sprung back into the rock crevice and clung there desperately, his body seemingly shaken by the waves of sound as ululations reverberated like a roaring wind through the cavern.

Contrite and worried, Small One ceased his song in the middle of a phrase and dropped quickly to his former position. Exhaustion grasped him with painfully probing fingers, tearing at muscles and mind. He felt helpless and sorry for himself. Abruptly he surrendered to the child that was still within him. He no longer could command enough concentration to keep light in the cave. As darkness drained back into the area Small One could sense the heightening of that pitiful stranger's

fears. And he was too tired and too inexperienced — and still too young — to alleviate them.

It was not until almost time for the setting of the red sun that the stranger ventured again from his refuge. Small One had found in those tedious hours enough rest so that his power of concentration had been renewed, and he was able to will light back into the cavern. The alien seemed to possess no understanding of why light had reappeared. The phenomenon sent the being on a series of movements about the cave. Small One was able to catch enough from the mist of that mind to know the creature's movements were motivated by a search to find some explanation for the light source.

Small One tried to project pictures of understanding but saw that these only seemed to cause disturbance within the visitor's mind rather than clarity. He sensed that these pictures seemed like hallucinations to the creature, attributed to some mental aberration brought about by the strangeness of environment.

So Small One ceased temporarily his attempts to communicate and contended himself with following the visitor about. But this was also a source of uneasiness. At frequent intervals the creature would stop and look at Small One and make modulated sound: "Are you stalking me, Monster? Are you waiting for the right moment to pounce?"

And Small One would lie on his back, repeating his offer of the Ritual of Trust, accepting graciously

some rather timid scratchings and pats in lieu of the ceremonial stab with empty hands. And the stranger formed vocal sounds almost continuously, while he scratched Small One's belly, while he searched for the light source — evidently a method of generating within himself courage and a will to carry on. The sounds followed a pattern: "You act like you're tame, but maybe you just aren't hungry yet. Is that it, Monster? Are you keeping me in sight until the next meal time? If you're somebody's lap dog I'd hate to meet the master. He'd need a whole city lot just to do an about-face."

Small One stored these sounds in his memory so that later they might be given to the Wise One of his Family and perhaps deciphered. Possibly it might ~~be~~ a conference of the Wise Ones from all the Ceremonial Families before meanings could be found. Small One knew now that this alien thing produced brain pulses much like his own; he knew also that he was the first of his race ever to contact a living intelligence from another planet, a being developed out of a totally different culture. Thoughts of the honor and glory that would come to his Family set his heart to pounding wild rhythms of excitement.

The stranger's random searching for the light source had now turned into a repeated figure that was gradually leading them along one wall toward the cave's entrance. Syllables coming from the creature's mouth were changing character, seemingly more organized and less like incoherent responses to panic. "Look

Shep — or Rover — or whatever they call you — don't follow so close. I don't like that big mouth of your hanging over my shoulder. If you'll just not entertain any thoughts about making a meal out of me until I can maneuver around toward that entrance and get outside to my blaster we won't be on such unequal terms with each other."

A picture was formed. It came about probably because this creature's mind focused upon a material object which he visualized imaginatively, but it produced a picture whose pulses passed into Small One's mind — a dimly lit, flickering thing more shadow than photographic, but clear enough for Small One to understand. The creature's mind held an image of the little tube he had dropped by the heap of crystals, and desire for it played in ghost-like impressions across the picture.

With no thought of possible consequences, and with child-like generosity of the very young, Small One thought the tube into the stranger's hands.

“Well, I'll be damned! I'll be damned!" The syllables were symbolic of a dumfounded and completely incredulous state of mind; that much Small One could make out.

The creature sat, because surprise seemed to have drawn strength from him. He stared at the tube. He turned it over and over. He repeated the syllables of astonishment and shook his head and stared hard

at Small One. Then his shoulders straightened, and he rose with a confident manner utterly changed from the frightened watchfulness of just the moment before.

The eyes looked directly at Small One, and sound came with a strong vocal quality. "Well, Comrade, the shoe's on the other foot now. Can you comprehend that? Watch."

Small One saw the tube raised and pointed. A huge boulder across the cave suddenly disintegrated into a puff of pungent vapor. The voice rang triumphantly: "This puts the balance of power back in my hands! Do you understand that, Big Boy?" There was almost insolent ease in the way the stranger leaned against the rock wall; grim amusement in the new sounds coming from him. "Don't know how this happened, Pal, but there's evidently intelligence on this planet that's solved the problem of teleportation. Looks like they've been keeping track of me. Looks like they just don't want me to become a meal for you. So, Big Boy, watch your step! If you're capable of understanding what you saw this blaster do to that boulder, you saw what will happen to you if you make one move I don't like. Savvy, fellow?"

Small One could sense glee in the stranger's tones, and so in his child-like way was happy for the creature, glad that relief from fear had come to it. The visitor pushed boldly past and headed directly for the cave's entrance and the late afternoon sunshine outside.

Small One followed to the vehicle which had brought the visitor, and

sat patiently on the sand while the creature entered and made vocal sounds to an instrument Small One judged to be some device for communicating with others of the same kind. He caught snatches of the excited inflections: ". . . looks like we're on the point of finding a race with minds like our own, maybe more advanced . . . haven't made themselves known yet . . . obviously friendly . . . rescued me from some kind of monster that's sitting outside the scouter right now . . . put my blaster right smack into my hand . . . won't believe this, but they evidently did it by teleportation . . . safe now to bring the ship in . . . got us another Earth here, looks like!"

Small One saw the visitor return to the open hatch. He watched him lean against the doorway and listened to lazily confident sounds coming from the creature. "Still here, friend? You must have a lump of curiosity that's as big as you are. Why don't you trot off to the folks that own you and bring them back here to talk to me? How about that, fellow?"

There was pleasant satisfaction in the visitor's voice, and so Small One spent some moments trying to establish the bond of Sharing of Happiness with the creature. It was a failure. He realized that as yet he could not seem to span the gulf that separated their minds. But a determination was growing within himself to bridge that gap.

First he concentrated upon creating within himself that Silent Mo-

ment. He wanted to examine this urge to be the first of his world to establish satisfactory communication with beings from an unknown ball, whirling in its own tight orbit far out across the galaxy. He felt justly proud that the shadowed hand of Chance had chosen him out of his Family — and through him his Family, out of all the Families — to become the first one to receive this gift from space.

He faced the alternatives: relinquish this task to the Old Ones of the Families, or withhold knowledge of visitors from space until he, by himself, could appear before their councils and accept the plaudits from his world for the glory of his Family. He examined critically the impulses which were driving him toward handling the affair by himself, fearful that the decision might be prompted by pride rationalized as usefulness to his Family and to his race. He prayed a moment for humility and truth. Then he settled down with a reasonably clear conscience to the tedious task of setting up communication channels between the alien and himself.

Like the child that he was, he now felt confident enough to move the universes. He began with simple things, projecting into the stranger's mind images of his Family, their homes, their artifacts, then alternated with more abstract pictures of friendly Knowledge-seeking. He could see, from certain physical responses, that these visions were touching the edges of the stranger's consciousness, but without meaning. Fragments of unrelated thoughts

were intermingled like jackstraws. There was no order of memory storage. Small One's probing discovered at moments logically arranged sequences of thought and followed their lines gleefully — to find each time their tails drifting off into a limbo of jumbled impressions.

Like the child that he was, Small One became discouraged and fretful.

But those faint shadows of coming maturity, which had caused the Family Tutor to think him ready for the first step of Thinking Alone, held him tenaciously to his purpose. And so they faced each other through the twilight and the darkening purple of dusk, the stranger sitting in the open door of his vehicle, Small One squatting upon the fused sands of his ruined prayer circle. Brooding peace grew with the dimming of the three suns' afterglow. Cooling desert air carried the sound of the distant songs of the Lhronos. The fluttering of their wings and scratching from their claws made the desert noisy with preparations for bedding down in the burrows in the giant cacti.

Presently the stranger reached for a pouch of dried forage material. He poured some of the chopped bits into a carved wooden receptacle, then struck a small fire, brought these bits to a glow and alternately inhaled and exhaled smoke from them. Small One sensed a relaxing of tensions in the mind he faced and increased the force with which he projected his pictures.

Rewards came slowly at first, in

the form of puzzled frowns upon the alien's forehead. Conceivably they were unrecognized sensation caused by slow awakening of that dormant area of brain Small One was trying to reach. Small One could tell that his thought images were forming there now, fuzzy and distorted, but with increasing clarity and rapidity — almost as well-formed as those in the new-born ones reflected from the Mothers of the Ceremonial Families. Exactly when these pictures drew recognition from the stranger as attempts to communicate was not clear to Small One. His first inkling of it came with a repeated sound phrase that must signify incredulous astonishment: "I'll be damned!"

The creature sat frozen in the doorway of his vehicle and said it many times. The absorption of smoke into the respiratory system was forgotten, and the fire went out in the carved receptacle in his hand.

Small One then began patiently to teach the stranger to form answering pictures, as he had seen nurses do with infants of his Family. He recognized quickly that this being could not yet learn to reach into the minds of others for thought images lying there, nor project those of his own mind. This communication, at least for some time, would leave the creature's mind entirely passive, like the page upon which one wrote. Ideas with even a minimum of the abstract in them could not pass from one mind to the other unless some way were found to picture the abstraction in terms of a concrete, physical object. There was



SMALL ONE

reason to doubt that this being would ever grasp the imagery of the abstract.

But Small One did learn a great deal: This visitor was of a race called by themselves mankind; the home planet was in a solar system possessing only one yellow sun — which struck Small One as a dreary environment with a lack of variety which might account for the unused portions of this man's brain; he was one of a ship's crew of ten involved in exploration of planets for possible colonization.

Small One eventually managed to transmit a superficial understanding of the Ceremonial Family, some of its rituals, and the dedication of one's self to the five stages of exploration of the mind as preparation for maturity. This last Small One could find no way to explain clearly — since he had only just embarked upon his first stage and was, consequently, in the position of a child who can hear the words of his elders but cannot understand them. Yet Small One found the skepticism and ridicule in the man's mind gradually giving way to wonder.

It was becoming less labor now to converse with this man. Relaxation and peaceful thinking flowed between them, free and bright as star reflections in water. Excitement of discovery had brought the visitor down from his perch in the doorway of his vehicle. Caution was tossed aside. He dropped upon the sands beside Small One and lost himself in tracing figures and outlines to enhance the fuzzy images he was able

to form in his mind. Small One wanted to sing for the joy of it.

He remembered the effect his voice had produced upon the visitor during that first meeting in the cave and suppressed the impulse.

III

Night time's chill became biting, but the pair were too absorbed to be aware of it. Not until after repeated warnings from Small One's exploratory sense did he awaken to imminent danger.

It was the Wist, held in a harmless stupor by day's heat, released when cold followed the vanishing suns across the land. Small One remembered he had seen it in the depths of the cavern when the man's exploring hands had passed near it, remembered his intention to call an adult of his Family to destroy it before nightfall.

He sprang to his feet, feeling again the helplessness and insecurity of a child lost from his protecting home circle. He had never killed a Wist. No one of his age — from any of the Families — had ever dared attempt the feat. But now he knew he must try. There was no escape, for the Wist moved faster than any living thing upon his world.

The man sensed desperation in Small One's sudden leap and was on his feet . . . and then he saw the spider-like legs of the great predator, scrambling over a hillock into the prayer circle. He reached for his blaster — and realized he had left it lying in the doorway of his scout-er. He could never make it.

Small One was no longer aware of the man, not even of himself. He felt only the tearing pain of trying to force a concentration of energy greater than he had ever achieved. The Wist came at them across the circle, then slowed . . . and was suddenly miraculously crumpled upon the sand with the spasms of death contorting its legs.

Many long, slow moments passed before either one moved, the man held in a rigid grip of dumfounded reaction, Small One weak to the point of faintness from the tremendous channeling and focusing through his mind of every bit of energy his child's body possessed. Finally the man stirred, first to recover the blaster from his scouter, and then to approach the dead Wist warily, blaster tube held ready.

At length he turned toward Small One. "You — did this? You killed the thing?"

Small One could catch the stranger's meanings only from his incredulous tones. There were no images forming in the man's mind — just emotional responses throughout the brain cells, flashing like the wild sparking of a multiple short circuit. Small One tried to reproduce a picture of assent and explanation there, but all the connections laboriously built between them had broken down temporarily. "What weapon did you use? I couldn't see it. What was it? Where is it?"

Small One attempted again to project an answer into the man's mind, and found its agitation was still too great. Hoping to calm the man, he sat deliberately with his

back to the dead predator. After a time the man joined him, careful, however, to face the Wist. Small One then formed repeated patterns, trying in many ways to explain that he had thought death into the Wist.

And finally, long after the last convulsive jerking had left those great spider-like legs, the man was able to tear his attention from that black heap of death. Night's heaviness pressed upon the turbulence within him and leveled his mind gradually to quiet where pictures might again take shape, and he understood Small One dimly. "You mean you did nothing to kill that horror lying over there except just the power of thought waves?"

Small One misunderstood the skepticism he found in the stranger's mind. He felt humble and inadequate because youth had allowed him to do no more than barely blot out the carnivore's life.

He tried constructing images through which the man could understand that adults of the Families would have performed the task more efficiently . . . since they could separate the atoms of any structure from each other, and cause them to lose all bonds which held them together and to dart off as free particles. He explained that they could also cause the atoms to travel in a group, as a flock of birds might, and be drawn together into their tightly organized form in some other place.

At this point Small One found 'pictures in the other's mind beginning to give way to disjointed worry

patterns. The man rose and edged toward his citadel of steel. He resorted to modulated sound again, forgetting that Small One could not clearly catch ideas from it. "You mean just with the power of thought your race can cause the atoms which make up my body, or any other thing, to fly apart? And that I would cease to exist?"

When he finally was able to probe the meanings of these syllables Small One, with pride for which he was immediately ashamed, projected an affirmative answer.

He detected increasing wariness in the alien's mind, and the next syllables were delivered slowly, with a cautious sound in their inflections. "You mean that any time someone rubs you the wrong way he's gone — just like that! Kaput! On just a whim! It's beginning to look to me like a fellow would be much safer playing Russian roulette than having you around."

Small One, after finding the man's meanings, shaped images of his Family to show that only after passing through the fifth stage of Thinking Alone did such power come to his people — and that the fifth stage also brought control. He felt the man grasp this idea in a shadowy sort of way. Fear lessened, but a worried watchfulness remained.

The man climbed to the doorway of his ship and turned to wave. "I'm just a little too shook up to talk any more tonight, Pal. Let's get some sleep and finish it in daylight . . . And I hope that mind power of yours can't penetrate steel." The scouter's door clanged shut.

The first moment was one of disappointment for Small One. But the astounding fact remained: he had met a being from an alien world, and they had talked.

A great weariness was settling upon him. It was time to rest, for excitement alone could not have overcome the tremendous energy drain the killing of the Wist had demanded. He stretched himself upon the sand and blissfully opened his ears to the hiss and roar and bursts of noise that constantly passed through the universes from star to far off star. It was his music. Presently he slept like a tired, happy child.

Morning touched two beings whose minds were refreshed. Communication between them was easier, pictures sharper in the man's mind.

Much information flowed between them, but as the red sun rose to follow its more brilliant companion across the sky Small One found the man scanning the heavens with increasing frequency. Blank moments came into the visitor's concentration, and with them a tendency to lapse into his modulated sounds. "We'll be seeing the big ship pretty soon, Pal. It ought to be just about ready to hit the outer atmosphere by now. Then you'll be in the middle of a crowd, my friend!"

The man made frequent trips to the instruments through which he kept contact with his kind. And then there was a moment when he jumped from his scouter shouting: "Five minutes more, Big Boy! Look,

Pal, I almost forgot. I've got kind of used to your looks, but I don't know what those buzzards will do when they first step out of that ship and see you looming up like a blasted nightmare. Let's get you back into that cave until I can figure out a way to make them acquainted with you a little more gradually than I had to."

The meanings were caught with difficulty, for in excitement over imminent arrival of his comrades the man was again not using that area of his brain through which the two had achieved communication. Small One agreeably retired into the cave and found his ledge from where he could peer through the small crack and watch.

In a few moments the ship appeared, sat on its tail of fire a second, touched down and cooled. Then its company was out and crowding about Small One's man, with much exchange of their modulated sounds and exploring about the prayer circle. Finally Small One saw his man gesture toward the cave and start for it with his companions following.

He knew they were coming to see him. He stepped out into the sunshine, sending the newcomers thoughts of welcome.

The entire group stopped as if moved by a common control. Small One saw their hands go unconsciously to blasters at their belts, felt shock pour from their minds. He looked, bewildered, at his man who was still advancing.

"Don't mind them," the man was saying. "They'll get used to you."

And he turned back to his comrades. "Come on, you bums! He won't hurt you. He just looks like something out of a bad dream. He's tame as a kitten. Tickle his tummy and he's your friend for life. Roll over, fellow. Make believe you're a nice doggie for the people — before they take out for tall timber."

Small One could catch the man's meaning only from gestures accompanying his words, but he graciously complied, lying as still as possible while all the newcomers approached one by one to pat and scratch apprehensively, their vocal mechanisms producing syllables: "That's a nice fellow! Good boy! There, there now, pal!" And Small One's man laughed all the while, mocking their timidity.

IV

The next few hours proved rather disconsolate for Small One.

A bustling activity began among the visitors as soon as introductions had been completed. Small One found communion with his man reduced to an extremely few fuzzy pictures, for constant vocal communication with his own kind seemed to cause the man to use only the more primitive areas of his brain. The man was involved in physical activity, helping his companions to unload materials from their ship.

All the men made wide detours to avoid passing close to Small One, except one they called Doc. He stopped his work frequently to stare intently at Small One. Several times a certain pattern of modulated sound

came from Doc. "I'm going to need a specimen for dissection."

Small One's man was quick to answer each time. "Take it slow, Doc. This is evidently the intelligent race on the planet. They communicate by projecting images into your mind. I don't know how far this telepathy thing goes, whether it involves an ability to read thoughts or not, but quit blabbing everything that comes into your mind until we know a little more about these creatures. It just might cause us to face a bad survival situation."

Later Small One's man returned and they sat aside to attempt more exchange of knowledge. It became clear gradually that the man wished to see others from this planet, and Small One gleefully sent out the image of happy discovery toward the far-away minds of his Ceremonial Family.

They came a little before the setting of the third sun.

Small One, dreaming with youthful excitement about his part in this memorable event, was made aware of their arrival by sudden action on the part of the nine newcomers from the big ship, who dropped burdens and gathered into a tight group to stand uneasily with hands on blaster butts. Small One's man came toward him and said, "Get us acquainted with your friends quick and easy, old fellow. Let them know we won't hurt them unless they try something out of line. Hop to it, Boy!"

Small One understood from inflections what was wanted. He went and sat before the Wise One. Their

minds locked, and Small One laid in the Elder's mind a complete account of the man's arrival by a flaming vehicle, of the struggle to communicate, of mankind's susceptibility to fear, of its curious weakness which forced dependence upon material aids for most of its adjustments to life.

Small One became aware of his man's voice: "Look, fellow! My outfit's getting pretty nervous with all that mob of nightmares sitting there staring—doing nothing. Let's get these introductions on the road. Some of those tinhorn buddies of mine have itchy trigger fingers. This silence just doesn't look good. Are you talking to your friends? We'd better have some action and noise right quick, before something happens. Tell your pals to play doggie and roll over and make like they're tame so we can all get acquainted. Tell them we won't hurt them . . . if they act like good boys."

Understanding more from inflection and pantomime than he could extract from the man's mind, Small One tried to project a reassuring picture to the representative of mankind. Then he opened his own mind to the Old One and explained the need for performing the Ritual of Trust with these strangers. He felt immediately the strong pulses of disapproval that surged from every member of his Family. From the Old One came sharp images of rebuke: "You are still a child and can, therefore, be excused for straying from the proper use of Family Ritual. But as a child you must be bound again to your Tutor. You must

learn among other things that the Ritual of Trust is not lightly offered outside your own Family. These strangers are welcome. Perhaps we can learn from them; perhaps they can also learn from us. We shall make them welcome."

Small One tried to place pictures of these thoughts in his man's mind and found the paths difficult to traverse. Interference was there, both from a partial closing of that section of brain Small One had labored so long to stimulate, and from a confused self-pity the scolding had let loose in Small One's own mind.

Then the Family were rising to their full heights and advancing . . . and they began to sing the song of Joyful Brotherhood.

The thing happened suddenly, like an explosion. Small One heard his man shouting. He understood enough to recognize it as a warning: "Don't do it! It's their welcome! Don't do it!"

But the hiss of blasters was already cutting through the cries, and members of the Family were dying.

Small One knew what would come next. He sprang upon his man and bore him to the ground, sheltering him with his own body and the shield of his own mind.

He tried at the same time to project his knowledge of this alien race to the bewildered survivors of his Family. "They are afraid! The brotherhood song frightens them. Don't hurt them — let my man explain to them."

But the Old One had thought death for them.



The nine from the Earth ship existed only as particles lost among the multiple billions of such matter loose in the universe. Only the one man, crushed nearly to suffocation under the tremendous bulk of Small One, was left, gasping to inflate lungs pressed almost to collapse.

Crying with helplessness, Small One lifted himself from the prostrate body. He felt the Old One's mind touch his. The image it carried was compelling. "This man must go with the others."

Small One cried out in his mind against it. "This man is not evil like his brothers!" He tried to form pictures of the moments of sentiment that he had discovered in his man's mind. He begged in the name of the Families' reluctance to destroy intelligence. He pleaded in the name of the mercy which was so strongly imbedded in traditions of the Ceremonial Family, and for himself and the affection which he had developed for this alien thing. His man had taken no part in killing! His man had called out to prevent it!

Adults of the Family had now gathered, and they shut their minds to his while they consulted. Small One's Tutor was there among them and impressions of great sadness and pity reached Small One from his mind.

And finally the Old One left the circle to convey its decisions. "The man may live. He will be your charge so long as you desire his company. Your Tutor will instruct you in the powers you must have to restrict his movements. And

whenever darkness covers our homes he must be caged."

Small One bowed in the Ritual of Gratefulness and Obedience, but shame clung heavily to his body and spread a mist before his eyes. This was the manner in which a favor was given to a child. He read in the compassionate eyes of his Tutor the story of his failure to be ready for the Five Steps into companionship with adults of the Families.

He turned to the man and presented the council's decisions, but the creature was dazed, numbed by seeing his companions so suddenly become nothing. Small One cradled the man in his arms and followed with him after the Family to the valley of their homes.

There was no wild grief in the valley that night, for in this civilization of The Families members possessed the patience to soften sorrow into acceptance of inevitability. When Small One laid his man in the cage designated by the Old One and locked its door the volatile child's part of his mind already visioned the coming days of companionship.

Clang of the door brought the man from his dazed stupor. He screamed at Small One, "What's this all about? Why are you doing this? I killed nobody! I tried to stop them."

Small One sat beside the cage and throughout the slow pacing of twilight across the world thought quietness into the man's resisting mind. And then he projected to the man thoughts of gladness for the relieve

of life that the Family Council had seen fit to grant.

The man seemed inconsolable. Over and over he said, "What's to become of me? I can't take that ship back to Earth alone. What am I going to do?"

Small One caught hopelessness in words he could not understand. He thrust bright pictures into that dim area of his man's brain, fighting to arouse it once more. He built visions of the two of them playing together in the gay abandonment of children. He recognized now that, besides grief for dead companions, the man worried about his own future. And so Small One explained the Old One's decision minutely, projecting images of toys, of the pet Vakrun frisking and nuzzling around them, then a picture of the Vakrun and the man together, sheltered one in each arm of Small One. Then he made pictures of safety, security and the fun of playing together—the Small One and his two pets.

And then the man was pounding the bars of his cage with fists that quickly became bloody, screaming, "I am not an animal! Let me out of this! I am not an animal!"

The tumult brought the Old One. He thought the man into calmness and to oblivion of sleep, and then he stood looking down at Small One, shaking his shaggy head sadly. Small One felt shame. Apprehension for his man's future swirled like a black fog through his mind.

Morning found the man dead. He was hanging from a noose of his own fashioning from the bars of his cage.

Adults of the Ceremonial Family came to stand beside Small One and look with him at the pitiful thing, and their minds drew together into council. The Wise One read the patterns of that dead brain and spread their meanings out for the council to see: "This creature belongs to a race which cannot accept inferiority. It must either feel superior or perish. If it cannot achieve superiority through the mind it invents instruments of power to hold others in subjection to it. This is a race like the one which devastated our galaxy in the days of the passing of the Dark Star through our suns. And now that this man has found his way into space there will be more to follow. There will come another time of blackness—unless we can seek them out and destroy them before they infect the galaxy."

Involuntarily Small One exclaimed aloud against this, for it did not fit into what he had been taught about the Ceremonial Families. Nowhere did it reflect the tolerance and peace and hatred of violence which showed through every ritual he had been taught to perform. At a nod from the Old One the Tutor led Small One away to a quiet place and tried to show him by analogy with the Wist that evil forces must be eliminated before the bright sun of kindness could shine without clouds to mar it.

Eventually Small One was left alone with his grief, the contradictions of adult thinking still unresolved in him. He knew that his people would go out to the empty ship, and that an examination of

maps therein and of memory force impressed upon the atoms of their steel hulls would betray Earth's location.

Impulse said those ships must be destroyed before they were made to give up their secret, so that death would not rain down upon the innocent and unsuspecting world of his man. And the child in Small One leaped to the impulse.

Driven by a love for mankind, transferred through the love for his man, he hurried over the mountain pass and out on the desert toward his praying circle. And the child in him cried because he was not yet old enough to be able to separate those ships into their particles and lose their identities among the whirling motes of matter.

In his mind there was only the pit of the fire death to serve. Like a festering sore in the valley of volcanic cones which lay at the desert's edge was a pit filled with a yellow stuff belched from the depths of Small One's world. Powdery after it cooled, it was violently corrosive, reducing most substances to dust, reproducing itself like a virus as long as a bit was left to feed upon.

Small One had nothing adequate to carry the powder except some abandoned shells of the desert crawler which had a temporary resistance to its action. The crying was still in him as he carried two shells of the powder to the big ship and its little scouting brother. He leaned as far inside both hatchways as he could force his body and threw the pow-

der, scattering it as widely over both interiors as he could, throwing the shells after the floating stuff.

Then he sat in his prayer circle to watch through the hours, while the bright metal ships turned to piles of dust.

And he cried with his child's heart because these ships belonged to his man and would soon become, with their once proud passenger, an unrecognizable part of the soil of his world and a hurt-filled memory.

And then he cried because insight told him that he had made it possible for brothers of his man to find their way to this world some day, perhaps with the power to destroy his Family and his world.

Then the first sharp stings on his hands told him that some of the yellow powder had touched his own flesh in spite of the care used in scattering it.

He sat through the long twilight, through the evening songs of the Lhronos winging to safety of their night-time burrows, with the corrosion slowly turning his own flesh to pulp, and he cried his child's heart out over the inadequacy of his mind that chance had forced into monumental decisions too soon. He cried over the foolishness of all life which must by its nature spend so many of its brief moments of consciousness in the destruction of life — until some time in the star-burst of a glorious night the fiery disintegration creeping slowly through his body finally touched the center of his own life, and the young voice fell silent forever.

END

BLIND

ALLEY

In the country of the blind,
the one-eyed man is—doomed!

by **BASIL WELLS**

It was many centuries ago that the overcrowded spaceship made its final, clumsy, grounding on the planet of Croth. Only the oldest sagas, in story and song, deal briefly and carelessly with that original crash landing. What ensued concerned them —

The colonists must have numbered close to three hundred. From the constant tales of feuding and ugly blood lettings in those early months and years we must assume they were banished malcontents.

They built rude homes and started cultivating land not far from the landing place in two fertile, stream-watered valleys. With seeds and the few remaining head of livestock sur-

viving the landing, they started building a humble version of Earth.

A year later, perhaps less — for words and meanings and spoken fables change with each retelling — disaster had come upon them.

The plague — the virus — the darkness — struck them all within a matter of hours. Whether it was something native to Croth, or a mutated strain carried from Earth, we do not know. Their vision dimmed, clouded over, and died. None had escaped.

The twin valleys were populated by sightless humans and unseeing livestock. Only the intruders suffered blindness — the native birds and beasts seemed untouched.

The entrances to the twin valleys, five in all, were narrow and easily

blocked by walls of stone and earth. They had sealed themselves away from the rest of savage Croth and had learned to live in comparative peace and security. Their ears, their noses, and their fingers and toes swiftly adapted themselves. With the passage of centuries the very meaning of the words: "vision" or "sight" had become empty and the words describing color or shade, abandoned.

The population had increased remarkably until the valleys had become overcrowded. Then the outer walls were breached and palisades of stakes, later to be replaced with barriers of earth and stones, were pushed gradually outward along the downward course of the twin valleys' streams. Intervening hills and ridges broke into this ballooning outward thrust, and eventually a number of widely separated enclosures had resulted.

Gates and earlier walls cut the enclosures into many sections. The contrast of the neatly cultivated patches within the dikes, against the green seas of forest and tall grasses, must have reminded one of the ancient battle of the Hollanders against the North Sea.

Into this peaceful walled microcosm there eventually dropped a fatally wounded spaceship, a cargo ship burdened with electronic equipment, and replacements and repairs for mining mechs. The blowup of one of the ship's two power kettles had killed all the crew save Dorby Cole, and Cole had, somehow, managed to crash land the shattered mass of metals and plastoids.

The ship plowed into the rim of a broad green plain, ripping deeper as it went, until a ten-mile gouge ended just short of the wooded foothills of a Crothan mountain chain. A section of intact hull, complete with emergency space lock, thrust up through the tangled mass of tree roots and foliage of the prairie grove beneath which most of the ship lay buried.

Less than a thousand feet from the little island of forest growth a roughly constructed wall of earth, topped with dressed stone and sharpened stakes, ran back toward the wooded hills. Twelve feet in height, at its minimum, and often much taller, it blocked the passage of Croth's most destructive wild life. But it could not keep an active man with tools and ropes from passage . . .

Ban Telar stopped for a moment to wipe the sweat from his face with the hairy back of his forearm. He stood erect, the great stake he carried resting on the turf and leaned against his shoulder. As he rested, two other workers carrying similar sharpened posts passed him. Mert Rodn and Hekl Yenn — his nostrils recognized them. His lips curled when the bestial stench of Mert Rodn's unwashed body came to him.

It was Mert Rodn who was his most formidable rival for the smooth-fleshed girl, Esala Rowan. Rodn was an older man, twice widowed, and a thick-muscled giant. Already he had crippled two other suitors for Esala's hand, and Ban

Telar had escaped only by his youth and nimbleness. So now Telar waited a possible assault with the thick stake held before him as a shield.

The Warmth was above him, making his naked flesh wet and unpleasant, and attracting the tiny winged midges that swarm and sting. The breeze came from beyond the Wall, bearing with it an alien odor that was unpleasant and acrid and like burnt metal. He heard branches and leaves wrestling together, and the beat of feathered wings, and the rasp of armored insect legs and exoskeletons in the thick prairie grass of this newly reclaimed field.

"Ho, weakling!" challenged Mert Rodn from further along the path. "Must you rest with every other step? A fine mate for Esala you would make!"

So! The big man was not going to attack while Hekl Yenn, and others, might be within hearing range. He must be planning to catch him apart from the others. Telar shouldered his burden and started on again.

"The Warmth is not yet overhead," taunted Rodn, "and you are wearied. Before the Cold comes again we will drag your weakling body back to the village."

"It is not I who will be dragged, Mert Rodn," said Ban Telar. "As the Warmth grows so does my strength. But the Warmth lessens your strength. You are old and stiff, Rodn, unfit to father more children."

Rodn growled something angrily and Hekl Yenn answered doubtfully. He could not catch the words, but

immediately afterward his ears warned of something unusual. And then his nose scented a stranger, possibly a visitor from some distant sector of the Wall. Momentarily he forgot the two workers directly in front of him.

That moment's inattention allowed them to put down their heavy posts and launch themselves back at him. He flung the barrier of the heavy stake in their direction, and backed away in a quick shuffle into the unknown terrain alongside the path. But Yenn and Rodn came after him, from either side, his startled heartbeats and his breathing their guides. Yenn's slender fingers wrapped around his throat, and Rodn's wide palms and thick fingers bit into Ban Telar's shoulder and upper arm.

Rodn began mauling him. He was deliberate and merciless. He did not wish to kill Ban Telar for the penalty for murder was severe — the loss of both ears and the nose and life-long slavery. He wished only to cripple Ban Telar so lithe-limbed Esala Rowan would shudder to touch him again.

A forearm snapped. Telar clenched his teeth on the agony of his cracked ribs and his battered jaws and skull. If he could only twist free and run. Even into the unknown stretch of prairie away from the path . . . And his other arm popped as Rodn exerted his great strength.

Would Rodn ever have done with him? Was he not hurt enough as it was? Yet he knew that Rodn wanted his back to be twisted.

A strange voice, speaking strange angry words, was beside them. He heard no sound of blows; yet the hands of both Hekl Yenn and Mert Rodn fell away limply. There was only a slight *spppt* of sound, and an alien scent.

The hands of the stranger were upon him, working with the broken arms. He felt the bones grate and there was the sound of quick axe strokes, and then the pressure of wooden splints and stiff bindings holding them in place.

In spite of the pain he was aware of the approach of other workers in this new sector. They ranged themselves about the fallen men and about him and the stranger. He made their number between seven and twelve, the confusion and the alien scents making him uncertain.

"Why did you and this stranger kill Mert Rodn and Hekl Yenn?" demanded one of the workers, Aret Pol.

"They are not dead," Doln Perse's reedy voice cried.

"Then what have you done with them? And who is this stranger who speaks gibberish? Is he a madman?"

"He saved me from a beating by the two of them," Ban Telar said weakly. "I do not know his name or his sector along the Wall. He has not the scent of our people, nor the words of our village."

"Can there be villages and sectors of the Wall that we know nothing of?" the workers questioned. "Or are there Walls built beyond our Wall? Let us arrest this strange man."

There was a confusion and the

stranger mouthed harsh words, after which the *spppt* sound came and the workers fell silent. And then the stranger slung Ban Telar's body over his shoulders and headed toward the Wall.

That they climbed a rude ladder of lashed poles and descended on the further side in a similar fashion, Ban Telar knew. It was in his mind that this must be a worker from another Wall that lay beyond their own. Such an intriguing theory was often bandied about by the very young and the very old. The unintelligible words and the mysterious weapon would seem to bear this out.

He was carried into the coolness of a grove of trees, and the alien scorched metallic smell grew overpowering and almost sickening. Then a door clanged hollowly and they went down into an amazing blend of odors and sounds and brokenness. The stranger laid him on a firm, yet springy, surface and shortly he felt a pricking in his arm.

Afterward he fell asleep.

Ban Telar put aside the helmet that linked with the edutapes the spaceman, Dorby Cole, had chosen for him. A month of growing friendship and cultural exchange had passed since first they met. Now Ban Telar knew that Cole had come from another world, and that only a fraction of this world of Croth was occupied by his people. The concepts of an earth, freely floating in space, and of huge warmths, or suns, no longer seemed so strange to Ban Telar.

A week since, Cole had put the mentrol hood down over Ban Telar's skull, and as the thousands of tiny electrodes contacted his brain he had *seen* through the eyes of the ship's one remaining controlled robot. He had seen the green vegetation and the pale-blue sky and the silvery-redness of air, and gaily plated lizards darting among the trees. Out on the plains he had seen vast seas of four-legged beasts of many strange shapes and sizes, feeding and running and feeding again.

And he knew now that it was the robot, the super mech controlled by Dorby Cole's brain, that had crossed the wall and rescued him.

"I needed to make contact with your people," Cole had explained, "so I have kidnapped you."

Ban Telar did not resent his privileged-prisoner role. But for the stranger he would now be a pain-wracked bundle of broken bones and swollen flesh. It was the being away from Esala that hurt him the most. In his absence she might yield to Mert Rodn's offer of marriage. For Rodn *did* own three houses and a dozen fields.

"I have finished with the edutapes, Dorby Cole," he said as the Earthman entered the cabin.

"Good," Cole said. He came closer. "Let me fit this headband over your ears and forehead . . . So!"

There was a firm, though soft, pressure against Telar's flesh. He heard a click and then a building hum. A weird swirling of grayness faded and he began to see a faint picture. It was like the pictures he

had experienced under the mentrol hood while he controlled the super mech.

Cole adjusted unseen knobs, and the pictures were suddenly sharp and clear.

"There!" he cried out. "I can see! As though I rode within the robot—or controlled it."

"Since you have no eyes," said Cole, "I decided you could use some. No need for twin mentrols and a super mech. This allows you to see as well or better than myself."

"This is wonderful, Dorby Cole."

"A trifle selfish too, Ban Telar. From what you tell me of the ancient myths and songs I too can expect blindness before many months. If you can see—so can I."

"The sickness may have passed." Telar shrugged. "But if not I can teach you how to live among us. Even if the band fails you it is not hard to live within the Wall."

Cole was a chunky youngish man, red-haired and gray-eyed, his face fair and freckled. Now his skin flushed and his eyes were hot.

"For you, perhaps, it is easy. But I cannot smell, or hear. I would be in the way and helpless. These second eyes must work, Ban Telar."

"They give me an odd feeling," Ban Telar said, stumbling as he tried to walk across the cabin's buckled deck. "Already there is an ache in my skull and I feel sickness in the pit of my stomach . . . But I can see perfectly."

"It may take weeks to learn their proper use, Ban Telar. You will be like an infant learning to walk. But

in the end you will feel lost without your second eyes."

Telar's skull was splitting with headache. He slipped off the band, welcoming the darkness and the familiar smells and sounds. Perhaps, he thought, the gift of vision was not the wonderful thing that he had first imagined. Yet, even as he doubted, he was impatient to get outside and explore the broad continents and islands of Croth's one vast sea.

Out of the wreckage of the giant freighter Dorby Cole and Ban Telar had extracted the damaged amphibious skimmer, and repaired it. At first Ban Telar worked by controlling the super mech, but as his arms healed he used the huge robot less and less. And gradually he came to use the Eyes for longer periods until he took them off only to sleep or to work in darkness.

The skimmer was fueled and ready for the globe-circling preliminary hop. But before it left Ban Telar asked to be permitted to visit Esala Rowan. And, being in the hottest season of the year on Croth, he chose the period of Warmth that Earthmen call midday. At this time most of the workers and women of the villages within the Wall were sleeping. Only with the Cold's welcome, at nightfall, would children and adults again be about.

He took with him another of the dozen Eyes that the Earthman had fashioned from the electronic and mech parts of the ship's cargo. Perhaps if Esala Rowan could see as he saw she would consent to mate

with him . . . And together they could teach the People the use of other Eyes.

Within the Wall's confines the Eyes changed the whole character of the world he had known. He saw that the huts of brick and plastered mud were misshapen and a mad blend of colors and plasterings. The paths wandered across the plots of land, almost touching at times. He saw the naked brown bodies of men and women sleeping under the trees and inside the huts, and the sightless pygmy cattle, huge-uddered and leopard-spotted, in the fields. He saw a small boy, alone, slipping from a hut to play in the empty fields and woods.

He had stolen away, many times, in years gone by, to go on similar boyish explorations into the unknown.

Esala Rowan lived with her wrinkled old mother, Efa, in a hut on the village's outer circle of dwellings. Efa was a widow who never tired of extolling the wealth of Mert Rodn. And now Ban Telar could see how near to collapse was the mean little hovel of mud and thatch.

Esala slept close to the mat-barred doorway—her mother in a further corner. He whispered softly her name, and Esala's pale golden face and fair hair appeared. But for the sunken eye sockets she was as beautiful as the women in the Earthman's books and tapes.

Her nostrils dilated. She put both arms around his neck.

"Ban!" she whispered, "Ban Telar!"

"I did not want you to think I was dead, Esala."

"I knew you were not. They said the stranger killed and ate you after he stung the workers. There were many stories. Some said that Mert Rodn hired the stranger to carry you off."

Ban Telar laughed. "Then you have not mated with Mert Rodn as your mother wished?"

"Never. He thinks to win me by crippling his rivals. Let the whole village be crippled—yet I will not mate with him. And my mother . . . She is dead these past nine Warmths."

"Then come with me, Esala, to live with the Earthman. We will travel far and see many strange lands."

"You use strange words. What is see? And we must mate only if the Old Ones bless us . . . We must not leave the village, either. You were wrong to do so."

Ban Telar slipped the Space Eyes over Esala's head and adjusted the controls. He felt her shrinking within his arms and then a cry of fear sounded. Faint though it was he covered her lips with his palm.

"This is seeing, Esala. The Earthman gave this gift to many of our people. After we have been blessed by the Old Ones and are mates I will take you to him."

Esala was pawing the headband from her forehead.

"I am afraid," she said, when he took his hand away. "There is evil in this thing. There is flashing like pain that hurts not and strange things. Put it away."

Ban Telar shrugged. He stowed the Eyes inside the knapsack he carried and took Esala's trembling hand again.

"Come along," he said, "to the Old Ones' house."

"But they sleep," objected Esala.

"We will awaken them. We have waited too long to mate. We will wait no longer."

As they walked together down the empty narrowness of the street Ban Telar was astonished by the differences that vision brought. The crooked walls, sagging and twisted, with their unequally textured walls and warped door frames. The crudeness of the furniture that the blind artisans of the village constructed so sturdily—and usually, lopsidedly.

Finally they arrived at the ancient, and larger, buildings where the childless and feeble-bodied old men and women were housed. This was the governing body of the village, and few among the workers disputed them . . . Some day they too might be left homeless and helpless. And then they would be the Old Ones. Let the Old Ones make the laws. Bless the Old Ones. We too shall grow old.

"Awaken, oh Old Ones," Ban Telar cried. "Esala Rowan and Ban Telar ask your blessing on their mating."

There was a rustling and husky whispering within the main room of the dwelling and the odor of ancient flesh and long-worn blankets of wool and vegetable fibers. With his Eyes Ban Telar saw more than a score of ancients, most of

them huddling their wrinkled, ancient bodies in coarsely woven blankets despite the noonday heat.

"You have been gone from the village many Warmths and many Colds," a quavering old voice, Polg Rian's, charged.

"I was taken away by the Earthman until my arms were healed," Ban Telar said.

"It is against the laws for you to leave the village without our permission," the old voice said. "For this you are to have twenty blows of a staff across your back. And for a hundred Warmths and Colds you are to wear chains."

Ban Telar's right hand dropped down to the *stitcher* holstered at his hip. He had scoffed at Cole's insistence that he take it, but now he was glad. The nip of one or two of the paralytipped needles in the weapon's magazine could paralyze the strongest man.

"I have returned with a gift from the Earth our people left years ago," he cried, backing away a step or so. "With it you can see again."

"Ban Telar is crazed," the old man said. "He babbles of fantasies. He knows nothing of sight. Only we Old Ones know. Seize him."

By this time the noise had aroused other villagers, and among them, black-bearded and thick-bodied as a gorilla, moved Mert Rodn. His broad nostrils quivered and his teeth bared as he scented Ban Telar and Esala Rowan. He elbowed through the crowd.

"Let me set my hands on Ban

Telar," he raged, and Ban Telar saw his big hand go down to the sheathed knife at his hip.

Ban Telar tried once more to be heard.

"I speak only the truth," he said. "We are of the same race as the stranger. But his people can see, as we once could. With Eyes we can go beyond the Wall. We can see the stars and the sun."

"Seize the madman," cried all the Old Ones. "Seize him. Strike him down. Beat off his diseased head!"

Ban Telar cleared the trimmer key of his weapon and started backing away, with Esala struggling to get free from his grasp.

Dorby Cole had warned him that this might happen — that his own people would turn against him — but he had not believed.

"Let me go, Ban Telar," screamed Esala. "Do not take me to the devil from Earth. Do not torture me with the band about my head. Free me, demon!"

Anger cut across the confusion within his brain. He would carry her off in spite of herself as Dorby Cole had done with him. He saw the workers closing in on him, ten or twelve of them, and more arriving. In flight alone could he best them once he had escaped that constricting ring.

His thumb depressed the firing stud of the *stitcher*, spewing needles in short bursts. Four of the men went down and he leaped through the gap. Esala was struggling and crying out, and the villagers were setting up a howl that was deafening. The confusion was an aid, now,

for ears and noses could not distinguish the location of either of them.

He had gained the meadows and the carefully cultivated fields beyond the village before the Old Ones' cries for silence and order were obeyed. Then the hastily armed men, forty or fifty of them he estimated, came padding silently after him. And in their front, his head low as he followed their scent spoor, came the hairy giant, Mert Rodn.

"Put me down, Ban Telar," begged the girl. "Alone you can escape. Burdened as you are they will overtake you quickly."

"I will not leave you behind to mate with Mert Rodn," Ban Telar told her as he left the path and took to the fields.

"But I would wait for you," she said. "Truly. I do love you. Throw away the Eyes. Take your punishment. When their anger has cooled we will mate."

Ban Telar paused briefly to study the pattern of naked, bronze-fleshed men, brandishing their crook-bladed metal knives and their clubs and spears. They stayed on the paths, in the main, but a small party of four, Mert Rodn in the lead, were sniffing out his trail.

The ladders were less than two hundred feet distant now, and to the north. With his stitcher ready, and armed, he plunged directly toward them. Only once did he fire. A numbed worker went sagging to the path as he crossed it and then he was ascending the inner ladder to cross the Wall.

One last look he took back with

him into the enclosure as he turned to descend on the other side. He swallowed thickly. They were driving him out, a condemned hunted pariah; yet this had been his home since birth. His foot kicked the ladder away.

He started the descent.

The skimmer was ready at last. The two days spent in cramming a basic edutape course in language and history into Esala's stubborn little blonde skull had not been wasted entirely. But even so, they kept her hands taped together when she wore the Eyes for each increasingly longer period. She wore it now as they prepared for takeoff, and her taped hands were strapped to her seat.

"We will find other valleys, Esala," Ban Telar told her, "Where our children, and the children of those who wish to see again, can dwell."

"The Eyes are evil," Esala spat out bitterly. "I wish to smash them all. And the Earthman with them."

Dorby Cole shrugged his shoulders and winked at Ban Telar. "You picked a tough one, Ban," he said. "Better toss her back over the wall and catch a new one."

"He will not do so!" Esala's voice trembled with rage. "Ban Telar is to be my mate. It is you who are to blame."

Cole looked directly into the Eyes that Esala wore.

"Is it not good to see colors and trees, and your mate, Esala?" he demanded. "Why do you think the Eyes harm you?"

Esala sniffed and shut her lips primly. Cole started to turn away. And then she spoke again.

"It is not good that the Old Ones should be doubted," she said. "They have told us that sight, that seeing, is something imagined by children and brainsick fools. So it is wrong to make liars of them."

"You see?" Ban Telar told the Earthman. "Perhaps I must beat her. But then she would hate me. I do not know."

"Give her time, Ban," advised Cole. "Her world is upside-down. Remember the first weeks you spent."

Cole was strapping himself into the control seat. When he had finished he set about checking the gauges and dials on the control panels. He turned to Ban Telar.

"Did we remove the covers from the rear jets?" he asked. "I think they're free, but would you check?"

Ban Telar slid out of his seat and hurried outside. He checked the broad-tailed skimmer's jets and found them cleared. He started back toward the cabin's oval lock.

And Mert Rodn sprang from the concealment of the little ship's overhang to pin him to the foot-worn turf.

Rodn was alone. Apparently none of the others had dared risk the ladder and the crossing of the Wall. But hatred and desire for Esala had driven Mert Rodn to follow.

Rodn's horny hands were shutting off Ban Telar's wind. Already his ears were roaring and redness seemed to be flooding the Eyes. Con-

vulsively he struggled, his fists drumming at the older man's thick-muscled stomach.

His knuckles brushed the handle of Rodn's sheathed knife and he groped wildly for the weapon — found it! He tugged it out, a task complicated by the pressure of their two sweaty bodies, and then he drove the crudely forged blade into Rodn's side.

The throttling hands fell away and Rodn whipped into furious action. The Eyes were torn from Ban Telar's head. Smashing impacts from Rodn's fists and elbows and knees knocked him about and jarred the knife from his grasp. In the sudden darkness, once so familiar, he felt helpless and tiny as an infant.

Over and over they rolled, Rodn growling savagely, now, his teeth and nails ripping at Ban Telar's hide. Telar's hand clawed for anything, a rock, a stick or a wrench.

He found the knife, its unevenly whetted blade laying open in his palm. Painfully he reversed the weapon, using the ground as a base, and drove the bloody weapon again and again into his huge foe's body.

And when Rodn eventually shuddered and fought no more he knew that he was dead.

Dorby Cole came and rolled the ugly carcass off him, and patched his wounds, but in his mind there was a great confusion and an emptiness. He would not again put on the Eyes.

"No," he told Cole, "never again will I wear the Eyes. Esala was right. It was the Eyes that made me doubt the Old Ones. Find us a

secure valley where we can build another Wall for our sons and daughters to live behind. But mention no more to us that evil art of seeing that has lost us our native village and has made of me a murderer."

"You will feel differently tomorrow," Dorby Cole's voice said. "It is the shock of near-death, and your wounds. Surely, now that you have seen the beauty of your world you will not lose it forever."

Ban Telar said nothing. But in his mind there was the stubborn conviction that this Earthman, this demon masquerading as a friend, must die before he trapped others of the People into believing in seeing.

If he could only clear his mind and make his leaden senses and his weakened muscles react. The scent of the Earthman was hateful. The

knife of Mert Rodn was lying where his locked fingers had finally dropped it, and now he found it. He lunged at Cole.

"No, Ban!" said Cole hoarsely. "You are confused. Don't make me use the stitcher."

The scent of the Earthman was sharp and the sound of his vitals and the rasping of his feet on the turf. He hated the blasphemer. The builder of lies must die.

He sprang.

And then the needles stung his flesh and he fell. He could hear, faintly, and the scent of trampled grass was in his nostrils.

"I was wrong," he heard Cole say. "You will get your valley, Ban Telar, but no more. You are too old to understand . . . I must teach children from behind the wall. Only their minds are unwarped and free of superstition." **END**

ON THE STORM PLANET

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GREE'S COMMANDOS

by C. C. MacAPP

Illustrated by NODEL

The star-swarving armies of Gree had a new weapon—and Duke had to go and find it!

I

The storm below was a whopper, which didn't surprise Colonel Steve Duke since the planet had a deep atmosphere with a sea-level pressure of over forty pounds per square inch. Such a storm would blind enemy radar, if any. It might also incinerate Steve, pro-

tected only by a thin plastic pod and his equally flimsy suit.

He watched the roiling clouds swell toward him, and increased his deceleration a little. Presently, air pressure dented the pod, but most of his speed was gone now and the pod didn't heat. Clouds engulfed him, the flare of lightning was all around and thunder battered at the

pod. He endured grimly until he was below the lightning and in fog so thick he might have been sinking through milk. It got darker, until the flares from above were barely noticeable. The fog was more like ink; a dripping night air so dense he could nearly have turned off the grav unit and let the pod float down. He poked at the plastic to see how rigid it was. According to his briefings, when the pod got limp he'd be near the ground. It wasn't very rigid now.

Something like a miniature torpedo with a flashing light in its nose came out of the fog, emitted a brighter flare, grazed the pod, and vanished. He crouched, waiting for the detonation. It didn't come.

What the devil, he wondered. Some kind of a warning shot? Or a misfire? It had surely homed on him.

There was nothing he could do if they fired a deadly missile; they'd be zeroed on him now. At least, he thought wryly, he was sure, now, that there *were* Gree forces on the planet. Up to now, that had been only a computer probability.

He grabbed equipment, stuffed it into pockets and hung things around his neck. The pod struck and squashed flat, sliding a little. Tree branches poked into it, but didn't penetrate the plastic. He could hear faint sounds now, pops and rumbles, and see reddish flashes that didn't look like laser beams. He tore at releases, got one metal end out of the pod, and squirmed out.

He was on something that felt

like packed cotton with a lot of sticks in it. He scabbled away from the pod on all fours, thanking Providence (though his superiors deserved the credit), that it was a genuine Gree pod and he wouldn't have to hide it.

He bumped into a low wall of the cottony stuff, and understood. He was in a tree crown, solidier than it looked in the sneak photos. This was the boundary where it reared up, jousting for space with a neighbor. He pulled himself over and kept going. Now he noticed that the crowns slanted toward their centers, in a very shallow cone. He remembered that they were supposed to be fifty feet across, and that checked pretty well. He crossed another boundary just before strong red light bloomed foggily behind him. He peered back and found the fog much thinner. They were using dispersers, then; probably ultrasonic.

They were standing in the light, incautiously, talking about his pod. There were six of them, two men and four B'lant. The latter were humanoids with tough gray skins, very effective fighters in difficult environments. They wore full plastic suits and carried unfamiliar weapons.

The fog suddenly boiled around them and they all went down except one B'lant who caught himself, whirled, and fired across the crown. Steve could hear the subdued 'pop' that accompanied each flash of red light. The light beam, he thought, would be harmless; for

aiming only. But a dim figure that it caught jerked and doubled over and was falling before the flash was gone.

Someone doused the steady red light and in a moment Steve, with his helmet listeners turned full on, could hear sounds as if some of the downed men were crawling over the boundary. Steve's mind puzzled at it. Concussion weapons of some kind—logical, in this air—but not fatal, apparently, at medium range. Who had fired them? Suspicion lanced through him. Had the Birds of Effogus—? No, it would make no sense for them to invade, after going to all the trouble to sneak him down.

Anyway, he thought, he'd better move. He waited until there was enough noise to cover him, then rolled over another boundary and the one beyond it. The fog was definitely thin now, though fifty or sixty feet above it was as solid as ever. There were occasional red beams and enough steady glows here and there so he could see a little.

A red beam slashed out suddenly, only two crowns away, and impaled a figure just crossing a boundary. Steve could see the victim—a B'lant—gasp and lose consciousness in a way that confirmed the guess about concussion weapons. A red flare came on, and a squad of six, four humans this time, converged on the fallen humanoid.

Steve waited for them to put a couple more shots into him to make

sure, but instead two of them bent over, unsealed his helmet and seemed to be giving him first aid. In a minute the B'lant came to. They helped him up, and though he looked sick and was bleeding at the nose, he was nowhere near dead.

Understanding suddenly, Steve swore to himself. Live maneuvers. Not a real fight at all. But it would be just as deadly to Steve if they located him—which they would if he just squatted here. The weapons might not kill, barring an unfortunate kind of hit, but he couldn't afford to be captured, or even knocked out or deafened. He dug at the cottony stuff with his hands and managed to part it enough to squirm in. He groped down for something solid to hold to, and discovered that the crown was supported by radial shoots, each three or four inches thick at the central trunk, and far enough apart a little ways out for him to wedge himself between. He got himself into the least uncomfortable position he could and tried to pull the foliage together over him. Then he simply resigned himself to waiting.

The Birds' theory seemed to be right. These were commandos, a tough chosen lot; and ready for action, judging by the roughness of their training. So far, the thrusts had been tentative but demoralizing to Steve's side because there seemed no way to guard against them. Well, that was what Steve was here for—to find out how they managed to stage into this backwoods of the galaxy, through



all the blockades, watches and patrols the birds could devise; and how they got from here to wherever they raided. And, if possible, why Gree had chosen a world with nearly three times the air pressure normal for humanoids.

Steve wasn't quite on his own. There were natives, rather primitive, that he was to contact.

It was considered desirable that he survive the mission, if convenient. Knowing Gree's empire as he did, he wasn't very expendable.

At first light he unsealed his helmet and was assaulted by the forest smell: damp, sweetish, moldy. The fog was apparently thinning naturally this time. The cottony foliage turned out to be green, which made him think of it more as moss. There were no branches below him. Except for the radial crown at the top—went straight down, with bands around it at intervals like monstrous bamboo, into the fog that still hung thick beneath the canopy. The ground was supposed to be there somewhere, three or four hundred feet down.

He worked himself up cautiously and looked around, though he was pretty sure the commandos wouldn't be on the canopy in the daytime, and that their base wouldn't be close by. He was right. They'd policed up; even taking his pod with them. He hoped some supply sergeant wouldn't get a sudden burst of zeal and check records closely enough to find he had an extra pod.

The canopy was coming to life. There seemed nothing that didn't fly; even the things that crept did so on adapted wings, and could fly in a pinch. There were things from insect size on up to condor size. The latter were just as wary as the small things, which suggested probably natural enemies, even bigger.

The predominant body-shape was something like a manta ray, but with horizontally flat tails and well-developed heads on flexible necks. There was one common feature that was suggestive: everything had a third eye, on top or on the back of the head, looking to the rear.

He saw no feathers and no chitinous sheaths or membranes. Everything looked rubbery.

There was supposed to be a river close by. He thought it would be on this side of a ridge that he could see to the north. He plowed awkwardly in that direction, and within an hour could see the break in the jungle. He reached the edge and looked out over a placid slow-flowing river at least a mile wide. He squirmed himself out of sight and studied it.

There were flying things over the water, mostly of the same general pattern, and of all sizes. Fish—the first non-flying things he'd seen, except for the Commandos—broached the surface. There were other things that acted equally at home in the air or the water. One of those was a serpent six or seven feet long, with ribbons for wings along each side, that twisted its way through the air with a fasci-

nating motion. Nearly everything had carnivore's teeth—and used them.

He saw nothing on the ground below except some small amphibians or triphibians, but there were tracks at the water's edge.

The natives were supposed to live on the other side. He got out his binoculars and settled himself to watch.

II

It was past mid-day when he saw them. There were eleven, in a V formation, flapping ponderously above the opposite edge of the jungle. They wore leather harnesses and back packs, and something on their heads that he couldn't make out. He got out a signalling device, a sophisticated heliograph, adjusted it, and gave them five quick flashes.

Their heads swivelled. They pulled up and hovered. There seemed to be a conference, then one flapped up higher and dipped its wings, one after another. That might be an acknowledgement. He waited. So did they. He gave them five more flashes, there was another conference, and again the flying signal.

Finally they headed out across the river. Two flapped up, gaining altitude as lookouts, no doubt. The other nine stayed fairly low over the water and seemed to be hurrying.

When they were close he realized with a shock that the things on their heads were not headgear, but

trunks like a Terran elephant's, carried in a tight curl. As they glided down toward him—they apparently saw him from quite a ways out—he saw that the trunks, about the size of a man's leg, ended in three flexible digits.

Less than two hundred yards away, something startled them. The two lookouts came shooting down, very fast considering the thick air. The whole eleven dove toward the riverbank a few yards downstream. Steve, who'd been briefed in their queer language that sounded like boulders being ground together, could hear one mouthing orders. They were headed for a short concave arc of riverbank, splitting into two groups to occupy ends of the arc. Two lagged a little, waiting for the others to land among the tree trunks. Then they too landed, in the focus of the arc, and turned to look up.

They were very odd-looking on land. In the air they were streamlined enough; but aground on their wingtips and tails, with the forward parts of their bodies tilted up at forty-five degrees, they looked like monstrous thick three-lobed leaves with the stems pointed up. Their heads *did* look like elephants', except that there were no flapping ears, no tusks, and the eyes protruded, almost on stalks. He judged that the biggest—the mature-looking one who gave the orders—weighed twice as much as a man.

He followed their gaze. Still far up, mere dots, was a big multiple V of about three dozen flying

things. They came down in a steep dive. Now he could see that they were about the size of his prospective allies, but had no trunks. Instead, they had snouts like reptiles. The smaller things over the river scattered. The diving flock checked a little a hundred yards up and out, as if suspicious. The two decoys hopped end-for-end and arched toward the jungle, each in a single leap and glide. They certainly looked different in the air.

The lure must have been overpowering. The predators shot down in a knot, actually bumping wings. Missiles flew from both ends of the arc, and several predators flopped screeching on the sand. The others whirled away from the ambush.

Defenders leaped from the jungle to grab up what missiles hadn't fallen in the river. Steve had to classify the weapons as axes. The heads were discus-shaped stones with flaked edges and holes drilled through the middles. The handles weren't fixed at right angles, but were put on like the fork of a wheelbarrow so they were free to whirl about the stone, in the same plane. The handles were light, and as the natives' trunks hurled the weapons with great force, the handles bent sharply, whipped, and finally trailed in the air. A good arrangement, everything considered.

The predators were back, more cunningly this time, threatening enough to draw missiles but mostly dodging them. It was obvious the defenders would soon run out of axes and be overwhelmed. Steve

stood up, laser pistol in his hand. They were ugly things, in a way, but they were his allies and they fought intelligently.

He was no more capable of staying out of it than of growing an extra head. He shot coolly, breaking up the attack, not trying to stop individual predators from reaching the trees because there were too many. Some spotted him and flapped to get above him. He ignored them until they were close, then gave each a frugal rake of the beam. One landed almost on top of him, still alive enough to hop. He burned through its skull, then whirled to fire at two that had circled to take him from behind. They thudded near him. Others were coming from several directions. He knew the pistol would go dead any instant and there'd be no time to put another power unit in it. The air reeked of burnt flesh and the rusting-iron smell of blood. He saved his last few ergs of pistol energy.

A stone axe flashed by him and hit the closest predator, slashing its chest badly enough to down it. His allies were out of the jungle and rallying around him, with few axes left but with wooden lances ready to fend off as well as possible.

But the attackers were down to half strength and they suddenly decided they were out-matched. They wheeled in unison and shot down-river for the nearest bend. Steve got a new power unit in the pistol as his allies swooped down to salvage what axes they could.

It took them a while to understand that he could not fly, and when they did they were silent with amazement. Then the leader asked, as nearly as Steve could understand, whether he was at home in the water, and added that the river was dangerous. Finally Steve had to demonstrate how he walked.

They got busy rigging a harness so he could be carried, as they evidently carried cargo.

Of the eleven, two were dead and one so badly hurt he could not fly without help. Most of the others had minor gashes.

There was one thing Steve had to do before they left; dispose of the predators he'd burned. A laser wound would be recognized. He said in the native language, "Trouble, enemy," and pointed to the burns on the carcasses, touched his eyes and stared at the burns ostentatiously. They understood, and hustled to haul the carcasses out over the river and drop them. The leader said river creatures would eat them.

They lifted him, dangling, and started back across the river. He was glad to get away from the stink of blood, though he didn't fail to notice that it smelled like ordinary protein-life blood.

There was little talk while flying. From gestures and a few words, he understood that he'd met a military patrol and that the leader was of fairly high rank. His name sounded like "Gegego." He knew of the Birds of Effogus, and that they'd sent Steve to help in some way against the mysterious new

enemy. However, despite the demonstration of the laser pistol, Steve could see in Gegego's manner skepticism as to the effectiveness of a being who couldn't even fly.

Steve didn't resent that; it amused him, and in general he didn't find them too repugnant. They were fine fighters, and though they had an odor, it wasn't unbearable. This whole world assaulted his nose with such variety and determination that one more smell didn't matter.

They hauled him across and up the left shore for two hours, then turned into a small side-stream and slanted down, depositing him gently on an elevated walkway or platform. They'd built a wickerwork dam here, below a long pool, and along both sides of the pool stretched a village.

The walkways were tiered one above another, from tree to tree, and the dwellings were in sections of the tree trunks, as if holes had been cut into bamboo so birds could crawl in. There were leather flaps over some of the openings. The tree trunks, this near the ground, were as much as fifteen feet through, and the natural woody divisions between sections were secure floors.

The community fires were on the ground, fed by tossing down wood from the lowest platform. Most wood burned vigorously here, even when sopping wet; but the bamboo would hardly burn at all. Cooking was done by lowering the food on bamboo poles (and in bamboo pots,

if need be). There were boiled greens and grains, and flat unrisen bread, and barbecued meats. Steve thought he might as well find out at once how the food agreed with him, so he ate it, moderately. Some of the meat was a little gamey.

There were only a few females, mammalian, and even fewer children. This was clearly an outpost.

Gegego sent out squads in various directions, then, that afternoon, was ready to discuss the common aim. They agreed, using Steve's few words and pantomime, that the first necessity was to pinpoint the enemy and learn what they could about him without risking discovery. Gegego promised all the help possible. It seemed the Harnkrah (that was what the natives called themselves) had been missing patrols and had had one village shot up, without knowing what kind of enemy was doing those things, or where he came from.

Later, Steve lay alone in his tree section, letting his mind wander over the situation as it chose. He was going to be with the natives quite a while and he didn't relish being hauled around like a fly dangling on a strand of spiderweb. Probably it would be easy to build some kind of a glider here; then at least he could be towed. He might even tinker up some kind of flaps so he could fly without help.

Also, he could make stronger allies of the Harnkrah if he could work out some better weapons for them. Not to use against Gree, of course, but to make it safer for them to travel in predator country.

Their trunks could easily manipulate fixed catapults or crossbows, and he'd already seen that, with their strength and agility and their wide-apart eyes for good ranging, they made excellent marksmen. It was a shame, though, that they only had one trunk apiece.

During the next twenty days or so he did little but experiment with weapons and gliders and learn all he could of the language. He picked up the latter fairly well.

Gegego seized gleefully upon a heavy bow, on a post which swivelled in a solid mounting. "This," he grated, "will make our outposts easier to defend, and help us go into lands we have always wanted." He gestured to an aide. "I will send a report down-river. Soon the river will be lined with these."

Steve knew by now that the Harnkrah had a loose confederation that linked the whole area between this river and another farther north, from the sea up to the vague frontier. This outpost was part of the latter. To settle any farther inland meant fighting off more predators. A dozen fixed bows in a village, with plenty of big arrows, could make a difference. Still, he didn't want to be pinned down to outposts, so he ought to work out something that could be fired from the air.

"What if we made a thing like this," he asked, "but only half as big? Could you handle it aloft?"

Gegego made a pondering face. "I think, no. Not if we flew fast."

"What," Steve asked, "if two of you flew close together? Could one hold the bow while the other pulled the string?"

Gegego waved his trunk impatiently. "You do not see. We hold things in our mouths so our trunks can do something else, but the bad thing is that this weapon sticks out to the sides. The air would make it move around."

"I was afraid of that. How would it be if I made something that did not stick out to the sides?"

"Good, I think, if it had a shape so our trunks could hold it tight."

"I'll make something," Steve said.

In the process, he came to appreciate the virtues of the simple bow; which, reduced to terms of energy acceptance, transformation, storage and release, were astounding. In this thick atmosphere, though, he didn't want high initial velocity for the arrows so much as more weight; so a less efficient launcher — as regards speed of energy release — would do. He tried helical springs of split bamboo, formed in the heat of a fire. It was awkward to get the arrows into such a launcher and the springs bent too much laterally.

What evolved was a sort of bird cage, with six splints of bamboo forming a slender cage. On one end was a ring into which the arrow-shaft slipped, and against which the rear of the arrowhead pressed. On the other end was a hollow cylindrical handle, coaxial with the cage. When the handle was held firm and the ring compressed toward it, the splints belled out under tension.

In the air, a Harnkrah warrior carried the weapon in his mouth, with the thick heavy arrows in a quiver. When he wanted to shoot he seized an arrow by the head and inserted the other end in the launcher, through the ring, the cage, and the handle. The fletched end protruded far enough beyond the handle to grasp with his teeth. Then he took hold of the handle with his trunk and thrust it forward, pulling the arrow farther through and compressing the cage. When he let go with his teeth, the arrow flew. A good sharp heavy hardwood point made it a formidable missile.

Gegego hopped with delight, and acted as if he were ready to take on the whole planet. He sent weapon prototypes downriver with strong escorts, and went into production locally.

Steve had less luck with his flying machines. The flap arrangements could keep him in the air, but were too tiring and too clumsy at take off. He did learn, though, how to build a good glider out of bamboo and thin leather, and how to control it by shifting his weight in a comfortable sling. He had to settle for being towed to gliding altitudes.

III

Reinforcements were arriving steadily and Gegego had squads pushing upstream and establishing new outposts. The local settlement grew fast and became a production center for the weapons. Steve decided it was time to send

in his second report to the Birds.

The sender looked like a small telescope hung in gimbals so it would always point up. Actually, it would compress, scramble and squirt at a predetermined moment any message fed into it. At the right moment, a tiny dronship would be spacing out above the planet to gulp the message and null out again with it. There was always a small chance of detection, so Steve hadn't used the system any more than necessary.

He fed his report into it and set it out on a walkway where it could point to the sky. Now that he'd run out of work he was restless and moody. The smallness of the message sender, his only link with the galaxy, accentuated his isolation. He had no way of knowing whether his message would ever be heard. If not, the Birds of Effogus might just write him off and go about their investigation some other way.

He paced the platform staring down at the huge fires, which were kept burning to partially dispel the night fog. Creatures of the dark flitted in and out of the dancing light. The wet wood burned with loud pops and hisses, and with a punky smell.

A squad of scouts came volplaning down from riverward and landed on the lowest platform while a few youngsters, miniatures in every detail of the adults, circled excitedly. Seen from above, the Harnkrah in flight were very graceful, and aerodynamically admirable; but their total alienness bore in up-

on Steve. "Damn it," he muttered, "I should have thought of fermenting some beer or something. This is going to get worse." He turned toward his quarters to occupy himself rechecking equipment.

He'd only been inside a few minutes when he heard Gegego's voice calling him, "Ker-nell Doo-kuh! Ker-nell Doo-kuh!" He got up quickly and stepped outside. He always felt better when Gegego returned. "What is it?"

"A kullig with a burn like your weapon makes!"

The kullig—the kind of predator Steve had fought—was dead of wounds from the new arrows. The burn was older; a seared streak and a small hole through one wing. He said, "It's a laser, all right. But he might have gotten it anywhere."

"No," Gegego said, "it would be too painful to fly far. He was on this side of the river, two days' flight above here, but I think he came from the other side. There is a concentration of kullig and smaller things there, very unusual. And there is something not right about the fog." He made wondering gestures with his trunk. "I do not see why the kullig should gather there. Surely this enemy we seek is not foolish enough to be caught by kullig."

"No."

"Then," Gegego continued, "they must want the kullig there. Maybe to keep us away so we will not find them. We would not have found it, if you were not here and

If we did not have the new weapons."

Steve thought about it. He had no better clues. "Could you set me down there, on that side of the river?"

"All alone? It would be very dangerous for you."

"I'm not here on a vacation. I can scout the ground with some of the things I carry."

Gegego said, "I will talk to some scouts and be back quickly."

Steve added a hasty postscript to his report, giving the new data and the suspected location, and saying he was going to reconnoiter alone. Gegego returned and said without further protest, "Tomorrow night, as soon as the fog comes."

The glider slid through fog already so thick Steve could see only the nearer of the two Harnkrah towing him, tandem. Around them, especially ahead, was a bedlam of shrieks and bellows as Gegego's warriors bludgeoned a way clear. A contorting bulk tumbled out of the fog and into it again, and splashed into the invisible river. A swirling dogfight loomed suddenly, and the two towmen whirled aside to avoid it. The glider skidded and slammed into a kullig, which belled and slashed at a glider wing. Steve grinned. The glider only had to last a few seconds more.

They pulled him up sharply and the edge of the jungle flashed under him. The towline went slack as the two Harnkrah hovered. He shoved his weight back to bring up the nose and the Harnkrah dropped neatly, each catching a wing. They

lowered him to the canopy and he slid out of the straps and landed on the foliage as they hauled the glider up and around and vanished back toward the river. He was on his own.

He squirmed down through the canopy and hooked a strap over a tree shoot, then dropped a line over it, letting the free end fall. He went down, paying out line and letting it slide over the shoot for a pulley. He landed in giant fungi, scattering small creatures in the dusk; pulled down his line and coiled it as he crouched against the tree trunk. Above the canopy he could hear the hoarse calls of kullig, but he was safe from them down here. He activated certain instruments, and, as he'd expected, heard only the onset of the nightly thunderstorm. He could hear the river on his right, so he wasn't disoriented; but rather than risk traveling at night, he thought he'd better find a place to hole up. He found a fallen tree and wedged himself under it, among clammy but harmless fungi.

For eight days he worked his tedious way west, learning how to be comfortable or at least healthy in the dank sub-world of the jungle. There was no natural danger there so long as he stayed far enough from the river where kullig or certain triphibians ventured in. There was no sign of Gree forces.

On the evening of the ninth day his instruments told him he was nearing feeble electrical activity.

Now his impatience was hard to control. He forced himself to explore cautiously, step by careful step, until he'd mapped out a fence a little way west of a small stream. After one more day he knew the fence made a right-angle turn at a grassy knoll, ran west more than a mile, then turned back toward the river along another creek. The whole, then, was an isolated patch of forest with a fence just inside its perimeter, roughly square, a mile and a quarter on a side.

He drew back, shaved and cleaned up, cooked and ate a goose-sized creature, forced himself to rest briefly, then changed into a Gree-slave gunner's uniform. He hid what equipment he wasn't taking along, and started back to the fence. By morning he was across the stream and in hiding.

Two things surprised him. One was that a fog dispenser was at work, keeping the fence and the area within it clear. The other was the fence itself. He'd expected something like barbed wire, with alarm circuits, instead there was a vast basketwork of bamboo, with vertical posts spaced between the trees, reaching clear to the canopy, and strong horizontal slats woven between. He could see a few wires. At spaces, there were dim blue lights, high on the fence.

He heard voices and presently a five-man patrol strode along the inside. Three were B'lant; the others men. The uniforms were assorted, so probably everyone drew fence patrol duty now and then. They carried, slung on their backs, weap-

ons that could burn a man in two with one slash.

There was another patrol twenty minutes behind the first. Each came by twice in three and a half hours, then was replaced. None of the men showed any distress in the heavy air, so they must be well acclimated.

This close, his instruments registered more electrical activity deep in the camp, but it was well screened and could not have been picked up from space. There were no large masses of metal close to him; certainly none approaching the size of even a small Scout ship.

As soon as it was dark he probed along the fence until he found a gate, not guarded but locked and wired with alarms. That was what he'd have to get through, since he didn't dare climb the fence or cut a hole in it. He chose certain instruments and went to the gate.

The condition of the ground showed that there'd been some heavy foot traffic through the gate recently and that didn't add to his comfort. He crouched in shadow until the next patrol passed, then ran a dim flashlight all around the gate, studying wires.

He found the ones he wanted, and clipped to them, on either side of the gate, leads of his own which he stuck to the fence with gobs of sticky stuff. Working in shifts between patrols, he sealed onto the alarm wires small sleeves that looked like the kind used to repair breaks or join loose ends. These, however, were non-conducting and

of such material that they would not melt when he sliced through the alarm wires with a thin laser beam. He attached instruments to his own leads and poked them inside the fence so he could reclaim them quickly from inside. If anyone turned a flashlight toward the base of the fence, he was in trouble.

He turned on his instruments and watched small dials for a minute, then set his laser beam and sliced through the alarm wires, inside his taps. He held his breath, but there was no sign of trouble. What he had was a bridge across each cut, designed to maintain the standard pattern of currents against outside influences.

He'd already identified the lock arrangement, and now he tripped it with gadgets of his own, got through, and locked the gate behind him. He hastily twisted short lengths of wire across the cuts he'd made, at the sleeves, then unclipped his instruments and lead wires, bundled them hastily, and ran.

He had at most a few hours before the tampering was discovered — daylight would make it conspicuous. He trotted toward the center of the camp, where there were vague sounds. The fungi had been partly cleared away, which made the going easier.

Suddenly he stopped. There was a new smell, and if he knew military camps, it was garbage. He followed upwind until he could see a dim glow ahead, blue light again.

There was a hole in the canopy, only as big as one tree crown, and a long bamboo stairway leading up



to it. At the top were platforms, one of them hinged so it could be dropped in the daytime, out of sight from above. Now it poked up at an angle through the hole. There was a rope pulley for hoisting things. The whole place stunk of garbage.

A winged form swept above the hole, barely visible in the faint blue light. Steve thought he understood. The garbage was taken up to the canopy and dumped. This drew scavengers, and kullig to prey on the scavengers, and assured the camp—so they thought—that the Harnkrah would stay away. The fog was probably only dispelled for a short distance above the canopy, so there was no danger of being seen from above at night, and nothing to show in the daytime. Besides, it was a better way of hiding the garbage than dumping it in the river.

He grunted thoughtfully. In Gree's armies, the garbage detail was punishment, hence not composed of permanent squads. A stranger might not be noticed. He found a rotted tree with a hole near the ground, obscured by a fungus, hid his excess gear, then settled himself to wait.

IV

It was two hours before he heard the detail coming. He stood near the base of the stairway, in shadow, and simply stepped into line at the right moment. The garbage tubs were sections of young tree trunks, again saving metal.

Some of the men began to hoist those on the pulley. Steve joined the ones going up the stairs.

Six B'lant in clean gunners' uniforms led the way and stepped out onto the canopy, distributing themselves around the hole. Steve paired with another man to lug one of the tubs out onto the canopy, carry it to where a gunner pointed, and dump it. A horde of small things, some medium size, dove on it. Kullig circled warily. One—perhaps a greenhorn—croaked belligerently and swerved closer. A gunner slashed it with a weak beam. It shrieked and did a somersault in the air, caught itself and shot away.

The men were mostly glum and silent, but at the bottom of the stairs one of the B'lant gunners fell in beside Steve. "What did you do, gunner, zat you get zis punishment?"

Steve produced a wry grin and answered in B'lant, which he spoke perfectly, "I talked back to an Overseer."

The B'lant grinned. "You were zmart. You dodge ze mock-up."

Steve looked at him questioningly. "Mock-up?"

"You did not hear? Zree zouzard go out ze east gate, eight hours ago, on big mock battle. On ze ground! All zat mud and zings crawling around; and real laser guns among ze tree trunks!"

Steve grunted as if in assent. It was blind luck he hadn't stumbled into that exercise too; and their being out there increased the likelihood that his tampering with the

gate would be discovered, soon. There was nothing he could do except work as fast as he could.

He chatted with the B'lant as they passed through an inner gate, almost ignored by sleepy guards. When the tubs were stacked behind the mess hall, he simply walked away as the others did.

There were less than seven hours of dark left now. He spent one of them prowling the camp, attaching himself first to one group then another. There was apparently considerable turnover of personnel here. The layout of the camp was a standard Gree pattern of buildings in a circle, their outer walls forming a line of defense, with the camp's functions inside the circle.

In the second hour he found a closely guarded stockade fifty yards in diameter, which seemed to be the focus of the technical activity. Electrotechs, especially, were servicing something inside. The best chance for him to get in would be to pose as one of those, for which he'd need the right uniform. He watched various of the techs and finally chose a young one who seemed a little unfamiliar with the camp. He intercepted him. "Excuse me. I've just come in, and I was wondering where I could get this fixed."

What he showed the man was a compact photoscanner, of a type a slave had no right to be casually carrying around. The tech glanced at it and said, "You'd better turn that in!"

Steve looked as irresolute as he could. "I know, but I took it from a wreck and I don't want to have to explain. I'd pay you for fixing it, on the quiet. Or... I'd sell it cheap."

Even Gree's slaves could be tempted. The young man wavered. Steve said, "At least, take a look at it for me. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

The tech followed Steve into a shadow where light from a window cast an isolated shaft. He took the instrument from Steve and held it in the light. Steve killed him with a quick rabbit punch.

He stood looking down at the inert form for a moment. "You didn't suffer any," he muttered, then dragged the body close to the building and switched uniforms.

He strolled into the open, pushing aside his feeling of remorse. Now he needed some more specific excuse to enter the stockade, and maybe he could get it at the electronics supply shop. He located that and paused just inside the door until he saw a chance to pick up an ammeter that had just been placed on the counter for checking in. He was out the door before they missed it. He walked boldly to the stockade, showed the thing to a guard, and said, "Do you have to check this through?"

The guard glanced at the instrument and shook his head, and Steve walked by him without another word, and through the staggered doorways. He turned, without pausing, toward the first piece of electrical equipment he saw,

which was one of a ring of standard mobile generators. He paused beside it and looked where everyone else was looking, at a large apparatus in the middle of the stockade.

There was a metal platform, a few inches above the ground, with electrodes or projectors of some kind pointing toward it from six sides and from above. Thick cables led to the electrodes from generators like the one beside him, and other cables converged to a control panel where techs were making adjustments. There was an expectancy. One of the techs pushed a control and a glowing spot appeared above the platform at the focus of the electrodes. It expanded until it was a luminescent bubble clinging above the platform. A warning buzzer sounded and there was suddenly a humanoid, one of the Overseer race, in the bubble. He was in a clear plastic balloon—not a pod with fittings, but a mere bag, tied at its neck with a cord. The bag looked very rigid with pressure. The luminescent bubble collapsed and the bag wrinkled. The Overseer inside slashed himself free with a knife and stepped out. A tech hurried to pick up the collapsed bag and stuff it into a hopper. The new arrival was already off the platform and talking to the Overseer in charge locally.

The bubble formed again, and another humanoid, a slave, appeared in an identical bag. Now they came at intervals of a few seconds,

calmly, forming into squads and marching away. At the last, wounded came, all under their own power, some with splints or extensive bandages. Finally another Overseer materialized, this one wounded, judging from his limp, though Steve couldn't see because he wasn't in simple coveralls but in a complex plastic suit. Steve eyed the suit curiously. It wasn't a standard space type. Of course, they might use a special kind, for this heavy pressure... Then, suddenly, he saw the whole setup.

It was an underwater suit! That was why they used this planet—men based here, living in this air, were already adapted to diving! Sea commandos; and that explained many things.

But that wasn't important now. The important thing was the apparatus that transferred them! There was no problem in nulling a man in a pod, or a suit, or anything else of such small size and mass; but any object had to come out of null into virtual vacuum. Not that a few atoms of hydrogen, say, couldn't be shunted aside, but anything as substantial as an atmosphere—even one percent of this one—would demand impossible techniques and energy levels.

What Gree had here, then, must be an apparatus for forcing all the air out of a certain spot, and a null-coordination system accurate enough to hop an object exactly into the evacuated spot. The theory wasn't new. The practice was supposed to be impossible. Obviously, it wasn't. Implications came to

Steve. One base, a few thousand commandos, meant nothing now. Such a device could land armies right through a blockade! He had to get word out.

He turned to the generator and pretended to be testing it, using the ammeter and his body to hide the photoscanner. He got as many shots as he dared of the apparatus, not neglecting the cables nor the control panel. Then he stowed the scanner under his uniform and considered means of escape. What he had to do was get back to where he'd hidden his message-squirter in a rotting tree, and feed in what the photoscanner held—then get away from the sender and avoid capture until the message was sent. He didn't know when that would be, but it would probably be during the next day. There wasn't apt to be another garbage detail tonight, so he couldn't use that again.

At least, he'd better get out of this hot spot. He started toward the stockade exit, and paused. Something was up. Guards were listening to their helmet radios, and presently several of them left. Steve's mind raced. The chances were, they'd found the man he'd killed, but hadn't identified him yet. Otherwise they'd be swarming to this stockade, not away from it, and grabbing everyone in an electrotech uniform. Ditto about the gate.

Nevertheless, it was too late to leave the stockade, let alone get through the inner fence. Not by

stealth. So, if he couldn't sneak out, he'd have to break out; and the first step was to create a diversion; invent the biggest rumpus he could.

The closest thing to hand was the generator.

This model had its own grav units so it could be flown, and a platform where an operator could stand. It would be clumsy and slow, a childishly easy target for even a hand gun, so he couldn't just jump on it and fly away. But he might create an excuse for flying it away. He slid open the cover of the fuel-feed compartment and went to work. The fuel was a carefully drawn wire of a heavy alloy, stable under ordinary conditions but readily and cleanly fissionable in the chamber. If the wire fed too fast there could be a runaway. If things really got hot the whole spool of wire could fission at once.

Regulators made that almost impossible as an accident—but regulators could be destroyed. He got through some rods, then melted a bimetallic component that was supposed to clamp down under heat. With his fingers, he pulled the wire through the primary feed gate so there was a loose loop, being drawn too rapidly into the chamber. When things began cooking he moved on to the next generator as if he were testing them all. He didn't take the risk of sabotaging that one too, as many eyes would be alert now. He moved unobtrusively aside.

Someone shouted. There was a shocked silence, then a stampede for the exit that quickly

jammed it. Steve ran back toward the generator. He shouted at a tech foreman who had stood his ground hoping to do something, but who was about to change his mind.

Steve grabbed his arm. "The cables. Get them off! I'll fly it away!" He jumped onto the operator's platform and threw switches. The foreman gaped, then understood and ran to disconnect the cables. They dropped free and Steve lifted the awkward bulk. He hoped the accumulators held enough charge to keep the grays working. He looked down at the faces turned up to him and could read the terror and the hope. He got over the stockade wall and fought the controls to weave a path among the trees. The heat was scorching—he knew fission was far away. He'd cut it too fine! He'd never reach the dump area in time.

Desperately, he tilted the front end up and poured on power. He clung to hot metal as the generator rammed into the canopy, slewed and thrust upward again and finally broke through. He hurled himself to one side and buried his face in the foliage. If the generator got far enough into the fog...

Incredible brightness came through his fingers and squeezed eyelids, and shock waves hit him, one, two, like giant fists. He was up and scrabbling away before the glow in the fog was gone. He wasn't burned much. If he got treatment before too long, the radiation wouldn't matter.

He forced himself to stop and

think. Which way was the garbage dump? There might be several, in a ring around the camp. He'd have to trust his instinct for direction; whatever recollection he had of the direction he'd been headed. A few feeble lights gleamed under the canopy, but they didn't help. Something blundered into his shoulder and flapped away with a thin cry. Probably the blast had blinded a lot of things.

He moved on the way he'd started. Wings whooshed over him and he drew the pistol, but kept going and the kullig didn't come down. He went as fast as the foliage would let him. Someone would have done some thinking by now, and they'd soon be on the canopy after him. His lungs ached; it was like trying to run through high weeds.

A blue light winked on, to his left and ahead. He heard B'lant and human voices, and at least one Overseer. They spread out and now he could see gunner uniforms and the heavy beamers. There might be a slim chance he could surrender, playing it innocent, and not be burned down until he got a chance to use his own pistol or grab one of the heavier weapons. They wouldn't be sure, on the spot, that he wasn't a legitimate hero... The alternative was to go down through the canopy, hope to find a tree tall enough to reach and slender enough to slide down. On the ground, he might still reach the message sender.

More blue lights appeared on the

other side of him, and now he saw some below, on the ground. That hope was gone too. He crouched, listening.

Something small crept by him. He grabbed it and hurled it high and to the side. It screeched and one of the nearest squad sent a bolt toward it, and was cursed by the squad leader. Steve rolled onto another crown, hoping to get behind the squad. A heavy beam lashed at him from another direction and someone yelled, "There he is!" Blue flashlights swung his way. He waited, pistol ready. He might take a few with him.

All the lights suddenly went out and there were startled oaths. Squads called out to each other, questioning, until an Overseer's voice harshed, "Silence!" Steve's stomach went tight. There'd been rumor among the Birds of a suppressor blanket that stilled all electrical activity above a very low level. He moved very quietly.

An Overseer called, "Get some glow bulbs and chemical rifles up here!"

Someone, whimpering, stumbled into the crown beside Steve. Steve got away from him as fast as he could without making noise. The man thrashed around until wings swept down, then he screamed in terror. The wings turned and came back, and this time the scream was pure agony that ended in a bubbling sound. It hadn't taken the kullig long to discover that the rules were changed. They'd be hunting by sound, now. Somewhere, another man screamed.

Suddenly there was weird light. Objects tumbled from the fog ceiling, spilling out whorls of glowing gas that mixed with the air and continued to glow, spreading ghostly luminescence over the canopy. There was an explosion somewhere that made the trees shake, and three more in quick succession. Incandescence erupted half a mile away, boiled up into the fog and faded. A rattle of rifle fire broke out somewhere and spread, the old cartridge kind. There was shouting everywhere now. An ancient bullet-firing machine gun went burp-burp-burp, somewhere close, and ended in a bang like an explosive bullet.

Close to Steve, a squad led by an Overseer with glow bulbs tied around his waist came up out of a hole, lugging another machine gun, and frantically set it up. Steve crept toward them with his knife out. A kullig swooped toward the squad. The Overseer turned to put an explosive bullet into it, and as he did he saw Steve. Steve's knife beat the revolver but he only stuck the Overseer in the shoulder and the pistol steadied again.

Huge arrows flashed into the dim light and knocked the Overseer flat, and the flight of Harnkrah wheeled and split and came in again from two sides and rained arrows on the squad. Steve lay still because they wouldn't recognize him in this uniform. Then something that was not a Harnkrah and not a kullig came flapping over.

Steve called, "Here! Here! It's Duke!"

The slow wings, feathered ones, turned toward him and the Bird of Effogus came down to land on its elf-human feet, swearing softly as they tangled in the foliage. "Colonel? What 'air! Like flying in molasses!"

More of the Birds converged, carrying toysized rifles that must have fired the unfamiliar explosive bullets, mopping up and forming a cordon around Steve and the high-ranking Bird who'd landed. That one had found a better place to stand, and now folded its wings and smoothed them with its miniature-human hands, so that it looked like an elf wearing a bulky cloak. "What a world!" it whispered, "We got worried when you reported you were taking off alone, and came down to talk to your friends. When that blast went off we recognized your delicate touch, and called the ships down." It chuckled. "How did our blanket work? It's never been tried before on a large scale."

"It worked," Steve said. His

throat felt tight. There weren't enough of the Birds so they took part in many actual battles, and they'd come down after him. "I... didn't expect you," he said foolishly.

He watched another Harnkrah approach, and recognized Gegego. Gegego was calling loudly, and in a moment other Harnkrah appeared towing Steve's glider, which made the high-ranking bird chuckle dryly again.

"Are you all right?". Gegego asked anxiously, landing. He and the high-ranking Bird seemed to know each other already, exchanging nods. Steve thought, *I'm a little out of place among all these flying things...*

Then he remembered something, and felt better again. "Sir, there are three thousand armed commandos on the ground somewhere, on maneuvers, and they undoubtedly know what's happened. I think we'd better get on about rounding them up, so we can write this whole thing off and relax." **END**

Next month in IF —

STONE PLACE

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ZOMBIE

by J. L. FRYE

Invulnerable, handsome, strong, perceptive—why did the Zombies long so passionately for death?

The cold winter night was seeping into the nuclear submarine pens and the hour was late. However, a surprise inspection is just that and Rear Admiral Zagorski was at least warmly dressed. Now that the inspection was going well he was even becoming pleased.

That was a tremendous change from his first reaction on being dragged out of bed at a late hour of the night. Only two possibilities had occurred to him then. The first and least likely was war. And the second — well, as an officer and a non-party member he slept with a gun in his hand.

As it had turned out, it was a surprise inspection by none other than General Kazan himself. Mid-

night was an odd hour for an inspection but the general's unorthodox methods were well known. He hurried from ship to ship with only his own aide and the admiral.

There he would look about with his hands in his overcoat, not even bothering to wake the crews or the maintenance groups. Sometimes he disappeared into the interiors of the atomic submarines while his aide occupied the admiral with the usual questions that the brass invariably have asked. At other times the general would stand with him talking in perfect Russian, but for his native Georgian drawl, while his aide would disappear into the submarines, only to return and quickly move on.

Pleased with himself, the admiral found himself smiling as the inspection drew to a close. He stared at the big, broad-bodied general and thought that he looked much bigger than he did in his pictures. But there was no mistaking that face. Then the general pointedly made clear that he was not inspecting to find things that shined and sparkled as they would in any regular inspection. He wanted to get the general gist of the operation. He even made a little joke with the admiral — said he wanted what the American Army would call “the Big Picture” — and they laughed quietly together. All in all, he seemed pleased with what he saw and praised the admiral casually.

Admiral Zagorski was so pleased that he went overboard to arrange transportation for the general. His tactics on his lightning inspection tours were well known. To preclude forewarning, he was arranging all his transportation as he went, without using his rank or name.

A helicopter was quickly sent to the underground pens to take him to the air field near Leningrad. Until it came the general and the aide were guests of the admiral and they drank vodka and talked lightly.

Before following his aide into the helicopter the big general stood for a moment looking down into the admiral's face while the wind blew between them. “Zagorski,” he said. “I would continue to sleep with that pistol handy, were I you.”

Zagorski numbly returned his salute and watched him board the helicopter.

A Begal was warmed up and waiting on the tarmac as the helicopter settled down close by. A covey of military police and the officer of the day met the general and escorted him to the waiting plane. Once inside he told the pilot to clear for Kiev but that would change at the last minute and go to Kharkov. However, since he wished to make a surprise inspection there, it was necessary that the tower not be informed of the true destination.

The pilot, like everyone in the military, was familiar with the general's eccentricities. Even more important, he knew what the general had done in the past with subordinates who objected. There was no question and quickly the plane was in the air.

The general and his aide settled down to wait.

Shortly after the pilot had veered from Kiev to Kharkov a message was received over the radio system. The general and his aide joined the two pilots in the cockpit.

It seemed that a missile complex on the Kola Peninsula had been sabotaged. While they waited for further information a second message came through. The submarine pens near Vyborg had also been sabotaged.

“That's where you were, wasn't it, sir?” asked the pilot, a colonel.

“Yes,” answered the general, standing behind him. Looking sideways he could see his aide standing behind the co-pilot.

“We're only twenty minutes from Kharkov now, sir,” the pilot said.

"We'll have to clear for their pattern now."

"That's too much trouble to bother with," General Kazan said in perfect English. As the two pilots turned in surprise to look up at him, he and his aide brought heavy arms down on the pilots' heads, crushing them.

Less than two hours later they were free-falling near Samsun in Turkey. As their chutes opened and slowed them, Kazan watched the plane starting back across the water. He chuckled to himself as he thought of the trouble somebody was going to have trying to trace its whereabouts. Its autopilot would carry it about half way across the Black Sea before the bomb they'd left was triggered. Then, out of sight of land, there would be an explosion and the plane would fall into the sea. Poor General Kazan, he thought. If they even begin to trace this night's activities, it is all going to be at your doorstep.

Just outside of Samsun they met their pickup and soon were at one of the USAF bases. There, transportation back to the States was waiting.

The doctor met them at the airport with a car. No sooner were they in it than he turned to them.

"Well done," he said. "Now listen. You know how short-handed we are. Well, one of you has to make the change right away so he can be going again by the end of next week. I've a job for the other." When neither of them said any-

thing to him he ordered, "Don't sit there talking to each other! I don't have the equipment here to listen in."

"Okay, Doc," said the one who had been the aide. "We're both pretty close to the deadline. But the general there—" he gestured to the other — "has less time left."

"Oh? So it's the general now," the gray-haired doctor said. "You're letting rank go to your head, Pete."

"I thought I made a pretty good general," answered Pete pleasantly.

"My turn next time," laughed Joel, the ex-aide.

"Well, la-dee-da," growled the doctor. "I'm the one that puts the faces on. So I think I'll be the one to decide who is going to impersonate whom."

I wonder what they've got cooked up now that's so hot? Pete sent Joel. Then he asked out loud, "How did it really go over there?"

The doctor gave him a long look, then shifted so that he'd be more comfortable talking over the front seat. "Perfectly," he said slowly. "Total destruction on both. It'll be years before they'll have them back in the condition they were before your visit. As for Kazan himself — well, Admiral Zagorski sang very nicely when the Cheka finally caught up with him."

"Give 'em much of a chase?" Pete asked.

"Took three of them," answered the doctor. Pete's face smiled. "But he named Kazan and the OD at the Leningrad place concurred. They'll both be shot, and with no alibi Kazan will go down with

them." he stopped chuckling. "They're having fits trying to figure out what happened to that plane."

Then the car stopped before a guarded gate and the conversation with the doctor ceased. The two in the back seat continued to discuss the new job in their own manner; this made no sound, however.

The car pulled up in front of a large, single-storied building. The seat protested with squeaks as Pete slid his heavy body across it to the door. He got out, staring at the building and the legend above the door. PROS LAB, it said. As they began to file silently into the building a thought crossed his mind.

In a way it all started here.

The Cold War had never taken the turn so much feared in the fifties and sixties. Instead, with the emergence of Red China as a major world power, it had degenerated into a hot war of intrigue. Unfortunately, this was no more final a solution — without escalation to total war — than the earlier situation. In this atmosphere there was an almost accidental meeting between a brilliant scientist and an imaginative President at a cocktail party one evening.

The scientist had been specializing in prosthesis. Only he went farther; he developed a completely prosthetic man.

The one problem that he couldn't solve directly was the brain, the mind. He finally did this indirectly by utilizing the findings of another field. The computer people, while working with biophysicists, had de-

veloped a plasma capable of recording and sustaining brain patterns. Their intent had been to find some way of preserving the mind while performing extensive operations on the brain.

In the past such operations had been unsuccessful because the patient's personality or reason, or both, were altered radically. Almost by accident it was discovered that the brain, when successfully transferred, could operate independently of its organic body, with no loss of personality or reason.

When the two developments were mated, the Zombie was born.

The body was physically perfect, though it stood six-six and weighed three hundred pounds. Near-perfect synthetic skin made the resulting figure impossible to tell from a human being, except by microscopic or X-ray examination. It was possible to sensitize the eyes in both the infra-red and the normal bands, so that vision would be perfect even at night. The new, compact transceivers could be buried into the body, activated by thought, achieving an almost telepathic result. The body could withstand extreme ranges of temperature and great shock.

However, it was not without its defects. Not everyone could operate one. The brain transfer involved such prolonged pain that few could survive it without insanity. And it was discovered (after four deaths) that three weeks was the maximum time that the brain could survive outside of its natural body. After that, it deteriorated rapidly.

The President had listened carefully to the scientist, then had dipped into his emergency fund to finance what came to be called Operation Zombie; it was a compact army of superb spies and saboteurs, made up of almost unstoppable and unkillable men.

Zombies.

And that's what I am, thought Pete, as he stopped before a door marked *No Admittance*.

He swung the door open slowly and looked in. There was an iron lung on one side of the room, with a man lying in it who waved feebly at him.

"Hi, George," he said kindly. Then he looked at his own body.

It lay on the other bed in the room. The face was disfigured and half burnt away. The legs were thin and half wasted and so were the arms. Crippled and ugly for twenty-two years of my life, he thought.

And not even enough nerve ends to graft to.

Hey, Pete, came the thought into his head. *You keep sending out pleasant thoughts like that and I will get out of this overcoat and let you have that job without an argument.*

Pete realized that he had unconsciously been sending while he thought. He, as all the others, had to be careful; otherwise everyone would know what he was thinking all the time. Every thought wasn't necessarily sent, but thought was the way the transmitter was triggered and any thought could be

sent. And these thoughts aren't any more pleasant to them than me, he thought; but he didn't want to send that.

It was strange to him, but only the crippled and the infirm seemed to make a success, with the overcoats, as the prosthetic bodies were called. It seemed that only those who wanted out of their bodies so terribly bad that they would go through hell — which was approximately what it felt like — could do it. The time sense was distorted during the five-minute process, and the pain (which was indescribable) seemed to last for years. He personally felt that it wasn't even subjectively that long. But after a while of unabated and unvarying pain it didn't seem to make such difference. You couldn't black out or faint and you didn't grow numb. You went through it once to get in, and once to get out. Every time.

It was hell.

Sometimes an operative would come back from a mission to find that his physical body had expired. Then there was only the wait for death. The deterioration of the mind in the plasma wasn't painless either. The time it took was just as subjectively lengthened as the transfer.

One Zombie had come back that way . . . and stuck his head in the atomic furnace so he could die painlessly.

Pete! sent the doctor. He knew the doctor was using his desk console and really couldn't blame him; that man had invented the damned

overcoats but he was too smart to get in one. *Get on down to the office, Pete?*

Coming, he sent as he closed the door and started down the hall. *But not for God, country, or mother!* and he sent that too, before he closed off his thoughts again. Currently he'd been informed that the research boys were working on the sleep factor. It was fact that an operative in his overcoat needed no sleep and found it impossible to get any. This had proved an asset more often than a hindrance; however, they claimed that this might be the key to the three-week limit and might explain why transfer to fresh plasma resulted in death for the operative. Only by transfer to the natural-born body could the operative's life be prolonged. Then, too, on return to the natural body the brain just went to sleep. The length seemed to depend directly on how much time had been spent in the overcoat.

Then he was at the office.

Joel, the doctor and one other man were seated there. *'Bout time,* Joel sent.

"'Bout time," sputtered the console.

"Let's not be kids," said the doctor tiredly. *"When you've something to say, just say it. Don't act like rookies!"*

"Yes, sir, Doc!" two voices boomed out of the console.

The doctor frowned and leaned back in his chair with his pipe. And that's something else they didn't tell us, Pete thought. The prosthetic

bodies could see, tell a difference in temperature, and had a pretty good sense of touch; they just couldn't derive any physical pleasure. They were built to look exactly like a man at all times. They could smoke, drink and eat but there was no sensation to it. The chemists had even told Pete that he'd been poisoned four times. He hadn't known it. *"Well,"* Pete said.

The doctor flipped off the desk console and asked, *"What's the weakest part of our organization?"*

What do you think he's got up his sleeve this time? sent Joel.

Beats me! sent Pete. He said, *"The number of us. There aren't very many. Then, this place right here. One bomb and there's going to be an awful lot of dead me walking around."*

"That," stated the man who'd not spoken. *"is why I'm here. You don't know me but that's not necessary."*

Another one, sent Joel, Looks down his nose at us Zombies.

"We going to work together?" Pete asked. The man looked away from him without any desire to work together on his face.

"We caught him trying to get into this place while you were . . . away," said the doctor. *"He's on our side now. Has to be . . . But we're wasting time. Neither of you has much more than twenty-one hours. So who's going?"*

"I am," answered Pete quickly.

Pete! Joel sent. *I've got at least three hours on you. I should be the one to go.*

Not if you had seventeen hours on me, Pete sent.

You're pushing your luck, sent Joel. You trying to kill yourself?

I don't know, Pete sent. Aloud he said, "I'll go down to surgery so they can be changing this face of mine. You wouldn't want anybody to wonder what Kazan was doing walking around while he was being taken before a firing squad. Just radio me the dope." Then he turned and walked quickly out.

"They always act like that?" asked the stranger, sneering.

"What are you trying to say?" Joel snapped as he came to his feet.

The doctor shrugged and flipped on the console. "Joel," he said. "You go on down to the transfer room. I'm really going to need you next week. The sooner you're out the better I'll feel."

"Why not two of us on this job?" Joel asked angrily.

"I just want one man killed," answered the doctor.

It was almost nine at night when Pete finally stood in the street. Looking up Broadway, it seemed like nothing but night clubs all the way to the tunnel and on both sides of the street. For a moment he couldn't help but stand and enjoy the night scene. He could, if he wanted, see it as clear as day; but he didn't use his infra-red vision. The contrast of the night and the lights was too pleasing without it. He stood for several minutes as the wind flipped his trench coat; he knew that the wind was cold, but he wasn't cold. Finally he patted the .45 under his arm and joined the crowd.

He had a different face, and a different name, and the papers to prove both. He also had a man to find and twelve hours were gone. He knew where to go now, though.

As he casually walked with the crowds toward his destination he ran over what he knew again. The principal man involved was called Linder. He was a free-lance vendor of information; he sold to the highest bidder, no matter what nation, and often to more than one. He held the reins over a small-time outfit of hoods in the city. It often works that way, he thought. They have money and they can get in with the crooks and the gangsters. They let themselves be used till they have control — and then there's just one more gangster in the river.

Poor guy, thought Pete. He should have kept his nose out of Operation Zombie. We're too vulnerable. We can't even be presented to the American public because we kill and sabotage.

Up ahead was a little nightclub, the kind specializing in second-rate strip-tease and watered-down drinks. A small-time hood by the name of Scobbs owned it with a silent partner called Gilby. They used it as a front for their more lucrative activities, like the one Linder was coming to see them about tonight. In a way, he thought, I'm doing them a favor Linder would have them both in the river inside a year.

His thoughts ended as he came up to the entrance of the club.

Music, laughter, and talk flowed

out of the door. Well, thought Pete, it's time to go back to work.

The bouncer eyed him warily as he came in. Pete returned his stare. "Scobbs here?" he asked, letting a sneer fill his face.

"Whadaya want with him?" the bouncer asked, standing in his way.

"That," said Pete, "is between Scobbs and myself, punk!"

The bouncer stood undecided for a moment and Pete almost laughed. The guy didn't know whether he should take insult from him, or whether he was a friend of Scobbs or not. Before he'd made up his mind Pete said, "I'll wait." And he walked around him.

He sat at a table that had a "Reserved sign" on it. From it he could watch the door and keep his back to a wall. On the small stage a shapely girl was dropping the last of her clothes and wiggling more or less in time to the music. A waitress came up to his table and said, "This table is reserved."

Pete looked slowly up at her. Two men were coming through the door. The bouncer stopped one of them and pointed toward Pete. "I don't mind at all, honey," he said, standing up.

The men looked at him for a moment and then went past the bar and through a door marked private. The bouncer started toward Pete.

"Okay, buddy," he said as he came closer. "I'm going to take you around back and show you just who's a punk and who's not."

It was merely a feeling, but he

was sure there was another standing close in behind him. "Do I walk?" asked Pete. "Or does it take two of you punks to carry me?"

They were big men and each grabbed one of Pete's arms. He didn't resist, but simply relaxed and allowed them to drag him. Together they managed to get him past the bar and through the back door, but they were surprised at his weight. As the door slammed shut behind, the second man put a full nelson on Pete while the bouncer took his time taking off his coat and rolling up his sleeve.

"You haven't been a bouncer for long." It was a statement the way Pete said it "I've got a rod."

"That, buddy," the bouncer said, "you'll never get a chance to use."

"No," said Pete, smiling. "I just won't need to."

He shifted his weight so that the man holding him had to support it, and at the same time he shoved backwards with his feet. All his weight slammed the man into the wall only a few feet behind. The bouncer jumped forward and Pete lashed out with his foot, catching the man in the knee and dropping him to his hands and knees. Breaking the nelson, he swung his arm down on the bouncer's head. Then, reversing, he brought his other fist into the face of the other.

Pete stood up, straightened his tie, and went back inside. One of the men would never get up again. The other would wish he couldn't.

The bartender's face went white as Pete stepped through the door. When he made a move for what-

ever he kept under the bar, Pete casually opened his coat so that his gun was visible. The bartender went back to wiping the bar top and Pete turned to the door marked "Private". It was locked.

He broke the knob off in his hand, opened the door and walked in.

He followed a short hall to a thick door. Deciding it must be the door to Scobbs' office, he tried it, found it open and walked in. There were two men in the room. One, Scobbs, sat behind an over-large desk; the other, Gilby, stood in the middle of the room. There was also a girl.

He only glanced at her as he closed the door but it was enough to notice that she was tied in her chair. He was also sure that she was the most beautiful woman that he'd seen, even though her face was red and puffed. Evidently Gilby had been slapping her.

What the hell?" snapped Scobbs from the desk.

"Just a friendly little call," smiled Pete as he tossed the broken knob onto the desk. It gave him a pleasant feeling to see the expressions on men's faces as the knob bounced across the desk and off into Scobbs' lap. "I'm a friend of Linder's. Can you tell me where he's to be found?" Pete asked, moving close to Gilby.

"I never seen you before," Gilby said. He was a big man but found himself looking up at Pete.

"He's coming here," whimpered the girl in the chair.

"You stay shut up!" shouted Gilby, starting to slap her.

Pete caught his arm, straightened it out and broke it at the elbow. "That'll make it a little harder to get to your gun," he laughed as Gilby screamed. He continued to hold onto the man's arm. "Be good," he continued. "Or I'll start jerking it." Then he turned to face Scobbs, who hadn't moved. "Scobbs," he said quietly. "I dare say you've a gun somewhere. Try for it and you're a dead man."

He dropped Gilby's arm and Gilby winced. "You move," Pete said, moving behind the chair to untie the girl, "and I'll break the other one." As he untied her he became aware once again just how beautiful she was. She had a classical face and a full body and long blond hair. That's another thing, he thought bitterly. You still have the wants — and you can't do a damn thing about them.

Then she was loose and he told her to stay where she was. "Gilby," Pete asked, "who's the girl?"

"Ask her yourself!"

"I'm . . ."

"Be quiet, honey," Pete said sharply. As he moved back to Gilby he talked mildly. "What, pray tell, Gilby, did I tell you?" When there was no answer he jerked the arm again.

"Okay!" Gilby moaned. "She's the niece of . . ."

"I have a gun pointed at the middle of your back," said a voice from the doorway. "Raise the hands slowly."

"Linder, I suppose?" The man

didn't answer but the expression on Scobbs' face gave Pete the answer. "Now would be a good time to get your gun out, Scobbs," Pete sneered.

As Scobbs went for it, Pete wheeled Gilby between him and the doorway. He had his own gun out and shot Scobbs in the head before the little man had his drawer open. Two slugs from the gun of the man at the door ripped through Gilby and he screamed. Then, with the dead weight of Gilby pulling him off balance, Pete was firing at Linder. Then his right leg collapsed. He fell. Linder's face dropped away as he tumbled backward with his blood spurting out of his neck.

Pete rolled Gilby's body off him and started to stand up, only to fall heavily on his face. One of Linder's bullets had gone through his right knee. The leg was useless.

Then the girl was helping him. He thought that it was amazing that she'd come through untouched — and that she was very beautiful. "Hand me the chair," he said.

She did, a strange expression on her face. Pete broke the front legs and the seat off the chair. Then, using it as a crutch, he managed to stand up. "Is there a back way out of here?" he asked.

"Yes. Behind that curtain." She pointed.

"You're very beautiful, you know," he said, putting his left arm over her shoulders.

She kissed him quickly on the cheek and helped him out through

the curtains. As they slid into the taxi she'd flagged down. The police cars were converging on the club. "I wonder what that's all about?" asked the driver after Pete had given him the destination.

"A riot," Pete said. He took both of the girl's hands in his so that she couldn't look too closely at his leg, searching for blood that wasn't there. Then he decided to keep her really occupied so he pulled her close and kissed her.

She responded. He could tell that much. But it was pure nothing to him. No wonder they call us Zombies, he thought. But he really didn't want to think about it; she was too beautiful. And — bitter thought — any woman would be too beautiful for him, anyway.

There was construction going on at the Bay Bridge. They were detoured to the next one. The first pang of fear crossed his mind as he looked quickly at his watch; only two hours left.

Pete cursed to himself for the delay and for being forced together with this beautiful woman. Oh, they gave you a handsome face, he thought, and a perfect body. A real walking Valentino. His thoughts remained as black while she sat close to him and the taxi sped on.

As it was, they were in Oakland, driving around Lake Merritt, when the cabbie's radio beeped into life. What it said was clear and simple: "Man and woman sought. Man: handsome, about six-six, dark hair, maybe limping with right or left leg. Woman . . ." The cabbie hit the

brakes and brought the car to a sudden stop. He wasn't sure, but that cabbie wasn't taking any chances. He jumped out the door and started running.

It was so quick that by the time Pete recovered the man was twenty feet away. He slammed open his door and held his gun out. "Stop! Or I'll fire," he yelled. The man didn't even hesitate.

Pete could have dropped him at the range but he put the gun back into his holster. Quickly he wrote a name and a telephone number on a slip of paper and gave it to the girl. "Get out and find a phone," he snapped. "Tell them where you are. They'll pick you up; tell them I'll met a chopper just this side of the tunnel if I can't make it to the pickup point." She hesitated, reading it. "Move!" snapped Pete.

"But this is my uncle's name," said the girl hoarsely.

"Well, that explains what you were doing at Scobbs' place—but move!" He was already crawling over the seat. With one foot he wasn't going to be driving very well, but he had a chance—if he could get far enough before they set up roadblocks. The girl clear, he punched the accelerator.

Lights I can ignore, he thought as he roared through a red one at an increasing pace. But my time is running out. . . .

It was beginning to look easy as he passed the last of the houses. To his left the road bordered a sharp drop off, a long ravine with an inclined side and lots of

trees and brush. He saw the red light in the rear view mirror at the same time he heard the siren behind him.

Good for you, cabbie, he thought. But there was only a mile left to the tunnel and the pickup point was at the other end.

At half a mile to go his infrared vision could see the otherwise invisible road block. The car behind him was still gaining. He went another quarter mile closer before he swung the wheel hard to the left, crossed the double line and threw himself into the back seat. The car flew off the edge of the road.

The sirens were still going somewhere and the car was spinning over and over. He prayed he didn't hit anything hard enough to completely flatten the car and entrap him. Then there was a lurch, the smell of gasoline, a sliding and an explosion.

He sat watching the car burning for a moment. He could have gotten out, but he was just as happy to have been thrown clear. Even when it doesn't hurt it's not a nice feeling to know that you're burning. He'd had two hours last time he'd looked and he looked at his watch again; it had stopped. He rolled over and began crawling up the ravine toward the tunnel and the pickup spot.

His body wouldn't grow tired nor hurt, but panic and doubt could still assail his mind.

If only Operation Zombie had some kind of jurisdiction in the states all this would be unnecessary.

Fat chance that, he laughed to himself. They can't even make it public what we're really organized to do. He continued to crawl, knowing that till the fire was out they'd assume he was probably in the car or somewhere nearby. They'd never suspect that a man could survive a tumble like that and walk or even crawl away. Not till they'd not found him in the car anyway.

Besides, he wasn't a man.

The doctor's niece is beautiful, he thought hazily, beginning to grow tired. The two things hit him at once; he was in love with a girl he'd only known for a few hours.

Sleep meant death. He couldn't die now. Not now.

Up above he could see the bridge; beyond that was the tunnel. Just up that slope, he thought while his head started to spin; and he knew he didn't really want to get to the pickup spot because he was in love and that was useless and . . . his head began to spin and there were people and the world tilted upside down and there was noise and there was *pain*.

The pain wouldn't stop. It went on and on, and he couldn't think while the pain went on.

Pete opened his eyes slowly and stared at the white ceiling above him. Then he remembered the pain and looked down at his body.

His own gnarled and wrinkled arms were crossed over his chest. He could see his almost useless legs curled under the sheet.

He closed his eyes to hold back the tears that he knew would come. This was the real Pete; this was the way he was and always would be. That was engraven bitterly into his heart and mind, whether in his human or Zombie body. This was a hell and a pain far worse than any transfer could ever be for him.

Later, when his eyes had dried, he painfully managed himself out of bed and into his harness and crutches. As he stood up two techs came into the room.

"Hi ya, Pete!" one of them called cheerfully. "We'd sure given you up for a goner."

Pete stood unsteadily, watching him with a killing expression on his ugly face, but it was lost in the wrinkles and folds.

"That was some operation that you pulled off last night," the tech continued. "I sure wish I could qualify for an overcoat. Gosh, but you're lucky!"

What Pete croaked then wasn't understandable since his larynx had been ruined and he couldn't speak. The tone, however, was perfectly clear. Then he staggered out of the room.

"What's with him?" the tech asked.

"Beats me," replied the other tech. "You'd think they didn't like anything or anybody very much the way they act most of the time."

They shrugged at each other, wondering what guys like Pete had that enabled them to qualify for the overcoats when they couldn't.

END



STARCHILD

by JACK WILLIAMSON and FREDERIK POHL

Second of Three

Illustrated by MORROW

*The worlds of men were defenseless
before the strangest creature ever
spawned in space — the Starchild!*

VIII

If the catacombs of the Machine were the nerve center of the Plan of Man, then the great State Hall of the Planner was its heart. Huge as a hangar for jetless spacecraft, ornate as a Pharaoh's tomb, it housed the most powerful man in the history of

the human race, and it was worthy of him. The walls were paneled in gold. Crescent-shaped lunettes were frescoed with scenes of the nine planets and thousand lesser worlds on which the Plan of Man reigned supreme.

In the great hall, a score of attendants waited on the Planner's will:

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE . . .

Machine Major Boysie Gann is assigned to duty on Polaris Station, the artificial sun-satellite orbiting far beyond Pluto that constitutes one of the Plan Worlds' picket stations protecting the inner planets from the Reefs of Space. He discovers that his commander, Colonel Zafar, is involved in some undercover activity, but before he can do anything about it he is captured and marooned on one of the Reefs. There he meets a hermit, Harry Hickson, who feeds him, shelters him—and disappears.

A girl from the Reef settlements, Quarla Snow, rescues him, but when he tells her about Harry Hickson she refuses to believe him. For she knows Hickson very well . . . and she knows that Harry Hickson has been dead for years.

Yet there is no doubt in Gann's mind that the man he saw is the same Harry Hickson! The mystery is beyond solving for him, but it is only one part of a greater mystery. For Harry Hickson is linked with the strange religious cult, the Church of the Star, and somehow connected with that church is a queer, unbelievable, almost legendary figure called the Starchild. Who is the Starchild? No one knows. What is the Starchild? No one can say.

Gann's life in the Reefs does not last long enough for him to solve these mysteries. Quarla's father, a doctor, receives a new patient, who is Colonel Zafar—dying—rambling deliriously about the Starchild and about strange powers. And yet it is not all delirium, for something happens that is beyond all Gann's powers of understanding: He finds himself falling, falling—and alights 20 billion miles away, on Earth, in the sacrosanct headquarters of the Planning Machine.

Gann has no idea how he got there. When he is discovered by guards, they know no more than he, but they accuse him of being the Starchild. Gann protests he is not—that the Starchild is only a myth in any event.

But he learns that the Starchild is no myth. That has been proved once and for all.

The Starchild has sent an ultimatum to Earth, calling on the Plan of Man to relinquish its total control over humanity under threat of frightful reprisals . . . and as proof of his powers, the Starchild has threatened to extinguish the sun and a dozen near stars for a period of time.

And the threat was made good. Whoever or whatever the Starchild is, he has the power to halt the mighty atomic fusion engines that fuel the stars!

his personal physician, three black-robed Mechanese acolytes with their linkboxes and tonal beads, a dozen guards. The Vice-Planner for Venus was there, an efficient little engineer whose nose and ears were out of scale, seeming to have come from some gigantic donor. So was Machine General Wheeler, fixing Boysie Gann as he entered with a steel-gray stare.

No one spoke.

Dominating the great hall, on a huge golden chair, was the Planner himself. He was staring, lost in thought, at a great quartz table, on which stood scores of fantastic metal and crystal toys.

Gann found himself standing in the center of a great tessellated floor, alone. His guards had halted behind him. He waited for the Planner to notice him.

But the Planner's eyes were on his toys. He sighed and stretched out a hand to them, stacking them in military rows, as absorbedly as any five-year-old with his lead soldiers; he formed them in columns and marched them across the clean gleaming quartz.

The figures were dragons. They were monsters from storybooks, and creatures too incredible ever to have been in a story. Some were mirror-bright, some black. Many were in gorgeous rainbow hues. They had no wings, nor had they legs. Their heads were the heads of monsters, some with teeth like sabers, some with curious frayed flower-petal faces, like the muzzle of a star-nosed mole.

Boysie Gann had never been so

close to the Planner before. He could not help being a little disappointed. The Planner was only a man! An old, fat, flabby man at that—and, thought Gann privately, a bit of an eccentric, too.

Yet the Planner was the voice of the Planning Machine itself. It was impossible for the Machine to falter in its judgments, impossible that its chosen instrument be anything less than perfect. Of course, there were the recurrent rumors about the present Planner's predecessors—old Planner Creery, for example, who had fallen into error in attempting to allow the Reefs of Space entry into the Plan of Man under their own conditions . . . Swiftly Gann rejected that thought. This was no place to be thinking treason!

He turned his mind to the stabbing pain that had pierced him in the anteroom, when he had found the girl he loved, Julie Martinet, changed into a priestess of the Machine, Delta Four. How had it happened? *Why* had it happened? . . .

The Planner raised his great round head and stared at Boysie Gann. "You," he rasped. "Do you know what these are?"

Gann swallowed and stuttered. "Y-yes, sir," he got out. "I mean, I think so. I mean, some of them look like pyropods. The creatures that prey on the life in the Reefs of Space, sir—"

But the Planner was nodding his great bloated head. "Pyropods, yes," he boomed. With a sudden motion he swept the delicately carved pieces off the quartz table, sent them

crashing to the floor. "I wish I had a thousand pyropods!" he shouted. "A million! I wish I could send them out to the Reefs to kill and destroy every living thing on them! What insanity that these reef-rats should dare talk to me of freedom!"

He broke off and glared at Boysie Gann, who stood silent, unable to speak. The Planner said: "I stand for classic truth! What is it that animates the Reefs of Space, Gann? Tell me, for you have been there. It is the romantic fallacy," he roared, not waiting for an answer, "the eternal delusion that man is perfectible, that there is a spirit of goodness that can grow and mature in crass organic creatures! What insanity! And now they threaten me in my own Hall — blot out my sun — boast of more deadly measures still!" He pressed his plump arms against the carved golden arms of his chair, half lifted himself, leaned forward to Gann and shouted: "Who is this Starchild, Gann? Is it you?"

Boysie Gann was galvanized into shocked speech. "No, sir! Not me! I've never seen him. I know nothing about him—oh, except what I've heard here, when General Wheeler's men interrogated me. And a few rumors. But I'm not the Starchild!"

"Rumors. What are those rumors, Gann? I must know!"

Gann looked helplessly around the great hall. All in it were watching him, their eyes cold, their faces impassive. He was on his own; there was no help for him from anyone there. He said desperately, "Sir, I've told all I know a hundred times. I'll tell it again. I'll tell you all I know,

but the truth is, sir, that I know almost nothing about the Starchild!"

"The truth," boomed the Planner, "is what I say it is! Go on! Speak!"

Gann obediently commenced the old story. "I was detailed, sir, to investigate certain irregularities on Polaris Station . . ." As he went through the long, familiar tale there was dead silence in the hall, the Planner listening impassively, leaning on one arm in his great golden chair, the others taking their cue from him. Gann's voice fell on the enormous hall like words shouted down a well. Only echoes answered him only the narrowing of an eye, the faint shift of a position showed that his hearers had understood. He finished with his arrest in the catacombs of the Machine, and stood silent.

The Planner said thoughtfully, "You spoke of a sign. The sign of the Swan."

"Yes, sir." Boysie Gann demonstrated as best he could the supple motion of forearm and hand that he had seen in Harry Hickson and the dying Colonel Zafar. "I believe it refers to the constellation Cygnus, in which the main star, Deneb, is some sort of object of worship to what is called the Church of the Star . . ."

The planner turned his great head away from Gann, toward the black-robed knot of communicants of the Machine. "Deneb!" he barked. "Display it!" One of the acolytes spoke in soft, chiming tones to his linkbox. Instantly the lights in the

great hall darkened, and on the vaulted ceiling a panorama sprang into light. The Planner craned his thick neck to stare searchingly upward. Every eye followed his.

It was as though the thousand yards of earth and rock above them had rolled back. They were gazing into the depths of space on what seemed to be a clear, moonless night—late in autumn, Gann judged by the position of the constellations; perhaps around midnight. Overhead were the great bright stars of the Summer Triangle, Altair to the south, Deneb and Vega to the north. The Milky Way banded the vault with a great irregular powder of stardust. Low on the horizon to the west red Antares glowed; to the east was Fomalhaut . . .

Abruptly the scene began to contract. It was as though they were rushing through space, straight toward the constellation Cygnus. Fomalhaut and Antares slipped out of sight with Sagittarius and Altair's constellation, the Eagle; so did the Pole Star and Cepheus below it; all that was left was Cygnus, the constellation of the Swan, hanging over their heads like a bright canopy.

A voice chimed: "Constellation Cygnus. Stars: Alpha Cygni, also known as Deneb, blue-white, first magnitude. Beta Cygni, also known as Albireo, double, components deep blue and orange. Gamma Cygni—"

The Planner's voice cut in raspily: "Just Deneb, idiot! What about Deneb?"

The voice did not miss a beat. It chimed: "Deneb, distance 400

light-years. Surface temperature, 11,000 degrees. Supergiant. Spectrographic composition, hydrogen, calcium—"

"Planets!" boomed the Planner irritably.

"No planets known," sang the invisible voice. Gann craned his neck; it came from one of the black-robed acolytes, but with their faces shrouded in the hoods he could not tell which.

The Planner was silent for a long time, staring upward. He said at last, "Has the Machine any evidence of physical connection between Deneb and the Starchild?"

"No evidence, sir," chanted the invisible voice at once. "Exceptions as follows: Possible connection between star Deneb and reported Church of the Star. Possible connection between star Deneb and star 61 Cygni in same constellation, 61 Cygni being one of the stars said Starchild threatened to, and did, extinguish. Neither of these items considered significant by the Machine."

The Planner grumbled. "Very well. Cancel." The display overhead winked out, the room lights sprang up. The Planner sat brooding for a moment, his eyes remote. He stared absently around the room, his gaze passing over Boysie Gann, over the spilled toys at his feet, over the faces of the guardsmen and Machine General Wheeler.

His eyes came to rest on the black-robed acolytes. Then he sighed and gestured to one of them. It was only the crook of a finger, but the figure in black at once came toward him, holding something in his hand.

It was a length of golden cable extending from his linkbox. At its end was a golden eight-pronged plug.

Boysie Gann's eyes went wide.

If he was not insane—and no, he was not; for already the acolyte was stepping to the Planner's side, touching his forehead, sweeping back his sparse, unruly hair, baring the glittering plate that was set into his forehead—the Planner was about to undergo communion with the Machine!

The spectacle was fascinating—and frightening.

Heedless of the eyes on him, the Planner sat relaxed while the acolyte deftly slipped the golden plug into the receptors in the plate on his forehead.

At once the Planner's expression changed.

His eyes closed. The fretful, angry look disappeared. There was a second's grimace, the teeth bared in rictus, the corners of the eyes wrinkling in deep furrows, the jaw set. It was like a momentary pang of agony . . . Or ecstasy.

It passed, and the Planner's face went blank again.

His breathing began to grow more rapid. As the planted electrodes excited the secret centers of his brain, he began to show feeling. His face creased in a smile, then frowned, then smiled again, forgivingly. His lips began to move. Hoarse, inarticulate words whispered—slowly—then faster, faster. His plump body shook, his fingers worked. The black-robed acolyte calmly touched his arm, whispered in his ear.

The Planner calmed. His body relaxed again. His whispered voice stopped.

The acolyte waited for a second, nodded, removed the cable and stepped lightly away.

The Planner opened his eyes and looked around.

To Boysie Gann, the change in the Planner was stranger than anything he had seen on the Reefs of Space. A glum, angry, harried man had accepted that moment of communication with the electronic joys of the Machine; a cheerful, energetic, buoyant one had emerged from it. The Planner opened his mouth and boomed laughter into the great hall. "Ha!" he shouted. "Ho! That's good!"

He sat up and pounded his great fist onto the quartz table. "We'll destroy them!" he cried. "Reef-rats and Starchild—anyone who dares interfere with the Plan of Man. We'll crush them and their fanciful dreams forever. And you'll help in this, Boysie Gann, for you are the chosen instrument of the Plan in this great work!"

For a lunatic moment Gann thought of turning, running, fleeing—of leaping toward the Planner and letting the decapitation charge in his security collar end his problems forever. There was something wild and fearful in the great chuckling good humor with which the Planner bubbled now, something that terrified Gann. If the Machine could cause such personality change in its most favored of servants, Gann feared the Machine. Feared it! And that thought was in itself fearsome to

him, for the Machine had always been the great good master whose judgments were infallible, who always rewarded good service, punished only the bad.

Yet this particular reward seemed a very terrible punishment to Gann . . .

But all he said was, "Yes, sir. I serve the Plan, sir!"

The Planner shouted with glee. "Serve it well, boy!" he cried. "Serve it with all your heart and mind—or you'll serve it with your eyes and arms and liver, in the Body Bank! We all serve the Plan, boy. In one way or another!" And he dismissed Gann with a good-humored wave of one fat arm, and turned to General Wheeler. As the guards closed in on Gann and marched him out of the room he caught one glimpse of the general, staring toward him. The steel-gray eyes were cold and empty, but Gann could read their message.

Don't fail me, either, Gann, they said.

IX

There had once been a time, thought Boysie Gann, when life was simple and his duty clear.

In that dead, half-forgotten time—was it only months ago? It seemed like centuries—and he had found, and loved, and won a girl named Julie Martinet. He remembered the night they met, remembered their long hours together, their endless promises, the bright hope of happiness they gave each other. He remembered the long white beach at the Togetherness center at Playa

Blanca, and her kiss before he left. Warm, sweet, soft, loving, she had been everything a man could want. Her memory had followed Boysie Gann twenty billion miles out from the sun, and her absence had made that long voyage bleak.

Yet never had he been so far from her as in this room.

He could, if he dared, reach out and touch the lips he had kissed at Playa Blanca.

But the mind behind them was no longer the mind of the sweet, warm girl he had loved. The body was the body of Julie Martinet, but what inhabited it was Sister Delta Four.

Involuntarily he whispered: "Julie! Julie Martinet . . ."

She stood motionless, regarding him with grave dark eyes. He searched them for some hint of recognition, for the saving warmth of love that had filled them at Playa Blanca, but nothing was there.

She shook her hooded head. "I am Delta Four," she said, her voice a melodious chime. "I am to interrogate you for the Machine."

She stood watching him, waiting for a response, her pale face half hidden by the deep folds of the cowl she wore. The luminous emblem on her black robes mocked him. It was a *Keep Off* sign that he dared not ignore.

But he could not help saying, "Julie, don't you remember me at all? Can't you tell me what happened?"

She fingered her long string of bright black beads, each an electronic bell that rang when she stroked it. "Major Gann," she sang, her

voice in perfect pitch with the tonal beads, "I am, as you see, an acolyte of the Machine. I do not wish to be reminded of any other life."

"Please, Julie. At least tell me why you didn't wait —"

Her grave head nodded. "We have time," she trilled. "Ask your question."

"Why didn't you—I mean, why didn't Julie Martinet wait for me? I sent you a letter from Pluto—"

"Your message was delivered," she sang. "But Julie Martinet had already been admitted to training as acolyte for the Machine. She destroyed your message. She does not wish to recall it."

"But I loved you!" Gann burst out. "How could you turn your back on me?"

The serene pale face stared at him without curiosity. "Julie Martinet loved you," she corrected him melodiously. "I am Delta Four. Please sit down, Major Gann. I must interrogate you for the Machine."

Reluctantly Gann sank into a chair, watched as she moved another chair near his. She seated herself with deliberate grace.

From under the cape she brought forth a small linkbox, covered in a black plastic, like leather. "Major Gann," she said, "I must ask you if you are the Starchild." Her voice was pure melody, cold and perfect and remote as her white, oval face.

Gann snapped: "Plan take it, no! I'm fed up with that question! I've said it a hundred—"

But she was shaking her head. "Wait," she broke in. "One moment, please."

He watched her glumly, the ache of his bruises combining with the deeper ache in his heart as, hooded head intently bent, she once again touched the long string of beads. As each electronic chime rang out her throat echoed the tone, practising the difficult scale of tone phonemes that made up the artificial language called Mechanese.

Mechanese was the difficult bridge between the Machine and the human mind. Earlier computers had crossed that bridge by building their own structure of translation, transforming English into Fortran or another artificial tongue, Fortran into binary numbers, the binary statement into instructions and data for processing. The Machine's language was itself a sort of pattern of binary digits that represented its own electronic processes — circuits open or closed, storage points charged or discharged, ferrite cores in one magnetic state or another.

Human beings could not be trained to speak that binary language, nor could the Machine of the Plan of Man be troubled with the dull task of translation. Instead it had created a language that men could learn — with difficulty, with a consecration of purpose that required them to give up the coarser human aspects of their lives, but all the same with accuracy and assurance.

Mechanese was a bridge, but a difficult one. The Machine, counting time in nanoseconds, could not wait for laggard human speech. Accurate in every either-or response, it had no need of redundancy. It



had computed the theoretical capacity of the human ear and the human voice at some 50,000 binary units of information per second, and it had devised a tongue to approach that theoretical maximum.

Normal human speech conveyed only about 50 such bits of information in a second; Mechanese was a thousand times more efficient.

And, Gann knew, it was about a thousand times as difficult to learn.

Bitterly he realized that it was the very thing in Julie Martinet that first drew his attention to her — her soft, true voice — that had lost her for him forever. The Machine sought endlessly for humans who could be trained to Mechanese — sought them and, when it found them, did not let them go. Only such special individuals could be trained to speak Mechanese well, though it was possible for almost anyone who invested the time and effort to learn a sort of pidgin, or to understand it. A true acolyte needed not only a wide vocal range but a true sense of absolute pitch. The tonal beads would help. An acolyte could, as Delta Four was doing now, use them as a sort of pitch-pipe before talking to the Machine. But not even they would convert an ordinary human into one fluent in Mechanese.

Watching her tolling the tonal beads, Gann pictured the long, arduous weeks of training. He knew it required total concentration, absolute devotion. And its ultimate reward was the bright metal plate in her forehead.

Her quick voice trilled a chain of silver bird-notes. The linkbox sang an electronic answer. Her alert, emotionless eyes looked up at him at last.

"We're ready now," she said. "Major Gann. Are you the Star-child?"

A hundred interrogations, and this was the hundred and first.

Boysie Gann no longer needed his mind to answer the girl's questions. Repetition had taught his tongue and lips to answer by themselves. I am not the Starchild. I have never seen the Starchild. I know nothing of the Writ of Liberation. I have never engaged in unplanned activities.

And all the time his heart was shouting: Julie! Come back . . .

Each time he answered a question. Sister Delta Four sang into the linkbox. The strange, quavering notes sounded nothing like what he had said, but he knew that each difficult phoneme was also a meaningful morpheme, each sung syllable a clause. And each time she asked a question she paused, regarding him with detached interest, her perfect face as inhuman as her voice.

"My tour of hazardous duty took me out to the Spacewall . . ." he said, and went on with the long familiar tale.

He felt the bright gold walls pressing in on him, suddenly suffocating.

He wondered how many thousand feet of rock lay above him. Up at the surface of the earth, was the endangered sun shining now on

woods and fields tinted faintly green with early spring? Or was there arctic ice above this isolated, sound-deadened cell in the Planner's vast suites? Or miles, perhaps, of dark and icy ocean?

He had no way of knowing.

And abruptly he felt a wave of desperate longing for the Reefs, for Freehaven, for Quarla Snow. Those strange spaceborne rocks were somehow kinder than the Plan of Man. He was homesick for infinite space . . . for that fantastic concept, freedom . . .

The stern snarl of the linkbox brought him back to his interrogation. "Proceed," cooed Sister Delta Four. "You were attacked by pyropods?" Her voice was tuneful as a crystal bell, cold and empty as the black space between the Reefs. There was no flicker of feeling on the serene and secret oval of her face.

He nodded wearily — then, remembering: "Yes, but before that, I forgot to mention one thing. Hickson removed my collar."

Her brilliant dark eyes did not widen. She merely sang into the linkbox, still watching him, her eyes intent but somehow blind, as though she were already absorbed in her private ecstasy of communion.

The black box snarled.

"The Machine requires elucidation," Sister Delta Four trilled sweetly. "We must find this unregimented Harry Hickson. His knowledge must be recovered for the Plan. Then each organ of his body must be obliterated."

Gann grinned bleakly at her, look-

ing at the lips he had kissed so long ago. "Sorry. I can't help you. He's dead."

"The Machine rejects this data," she sang. "Did you not ask this unplanned man how he removed the collar?"

"I don't know how," he admitted. He paused, hoping to see some living spark in her eyes. But there was none. The black box whirred ominously. "I think he was a convert to the Church of the Star," said Gann hurriedly. "I think — that is, as I understand it, his power was thought to come from Deneb."

An angry peal from the linkbox. "That is self-evidently false," sang the cool voice of Sister Delta Four. "No star possesses any such power to share. No mind in the universe is more powerful than the Machine."

She paused, while the black box snarled again. "If the falsehood is Harry Hickson's, the truth will be extracted when he is captured," she translated sweetly. "If the falsehood is yours, Major Gann, you are in grave danger of the Body Bank."

He cried: "I'm telling the truth! I'm loyal to the Plan of Man!"

The box sang; the girl intoned, "The Machine rejects such merely verbal assurances. One moment. The Machine is receiving additional data through another input."

Queerly, the girl's voice was fading.

Gann blinked at her. She seemed to be moving — dwindling — as though she were falling away from him, down through the long dark

emptiness of space. It was as though Gann were looking at her through a zoom lens, pulling away. She receded a thousand yards —

Then she was back. Gann felt a moment's vertigo, as though the Planner's suite down in the bowels of the earth were somehow dancing a slow waltz. The feeling passed.

The linkbox whirred menacingly, and Sister Delta Four sang, "The Machine terminates this interview." A sharp hum from the linkbox. "It reminds you that unplanned ideas, like unplanned words and unplanned actions, must be severely corrected. But it reserves judgment on your ultimate disposition."

Her white, perfect face was smiling slightly, perhaps in contemplation of her instant rapture that was soon to come, when the buried electrodes would excite her brain to the incomparable bliss of electronic communion. But the linkbox was not yet through with her. It buzzed again, harshly.

"The Machine finds your narrative incomplete," she recited melodiously, contemplating Gann with her dark, serene eyes. "You have not identified the Starchild. You have revealed no facts about the *Togethershhip*. You have not accounted for the so-called Writ of Liberation. You have not explained how you got into the vault of the Machine."

Gann shook his head. "I don't know what to tell you," he said. The box whirred implacably.

"Your statements are inadequate," Sister Delta Four sang again. "But the interview is concluded —"

There was that surge of unreal motion again. Gann gripped his chair. This time even the girl felt it; her perfect lips opened, her eyes shook a flicker of surprise.

The linkbox twittered urgently. At the same moment loud bells and sirens began to sound elsewhere in the Planner's warrens.

"Earth temblors," the girl began haltingly, "have been detected at several points —"

Then the linkbox crashed out a loud, despairing sound. Sister Delta Four gasped. Instinctively she reached out and caught Boysie Gann's arm. "Pyropods!" she cried. "The— The — Oh, you've got to help! The Planner's hall has been invaded by pyropods! Hundreds of them! They're there now!"

The private room in which Sister Delta Four had been interrogating Boysie Gann was one tiny office in the immense network of corridors and chambers that was the administrative and living headquarters of the Planner. It had been locked, but the door opened instantly to the pattern of the girl's fingertips on the knob. It flung wide, and Gann and the girl ran through the open doorway, into a wide, gold-walled hall. Broad as a highway, tall as a two-story building, it ran straight through the heart of a mountain, the Planner's rooms opening off it at intervals all the way. It was a great ceremonial thoroughfare, lined with glittering gold and crystal statuary, hung in gold brocades, paneled with murals and viewcreens.

And it was filled with the reeking, choking, dusty smoke of jet exhausts.

A scream of some huge rocketing body ripping through the air smote their ears. A human shout of anguish — the cries of men taken by surprise — the thin, ear-splitting volley of laser guns. In all the noise and confusion Gann saw one thing clearly — saw it, grabbed the girl by her arm and pulled her back into the shelter of the doorway.

A pyropod was rocketing toward them down the hall.

It roared at them at a speed nearing Mach One; in the cramped quarters of the hall the shriek of its passage was physically painful, deafening. And the look of the thing was that of an avenging angel come to Earth, set on destruction.

It was a nightmare come to life. Wilder than the most fantastic of the Planner's toys, it was shaped a little like a scorpion, larger than a charging buffalo. Its eyes were great mirrors with stalked receptors at the center — natural radio telescopes, glowing red. Its jaws were mighty enough to crunch steel bars. Its talons could rip through armor plate. Its body was armored with darkly shining scales; a long wicked saber-like tail was arched over its back. And the whole thing was screaming through the air of the tunnel toward them.

The girl cried out in fear; Gann pulled her head against his chest, quieting her — though in truth the sound of her terror was lost in the earsplitting din of the pyropod's passage. This was no baby, like the one

Gann had played with on Harry Hickson's reef. It was an armored juggernaut, full grown, capable of battling a Plan space cruiser on equal terms.

It passed them and rocketed into a group of armed guardsmen, knotted a hundred yards down the hall. They were firing wildly with laser and projectile weapons; it struck them, passed . . . and they were gone. Only a jackstraw heap of corpses and stirring near-dead marked where they had been.

"Great Machine!" gasped Sister Delta Four, her impeccable serenity gone, her black hood thrown back, the bright metal plaque blinking out of a terrified face. "What was that?"

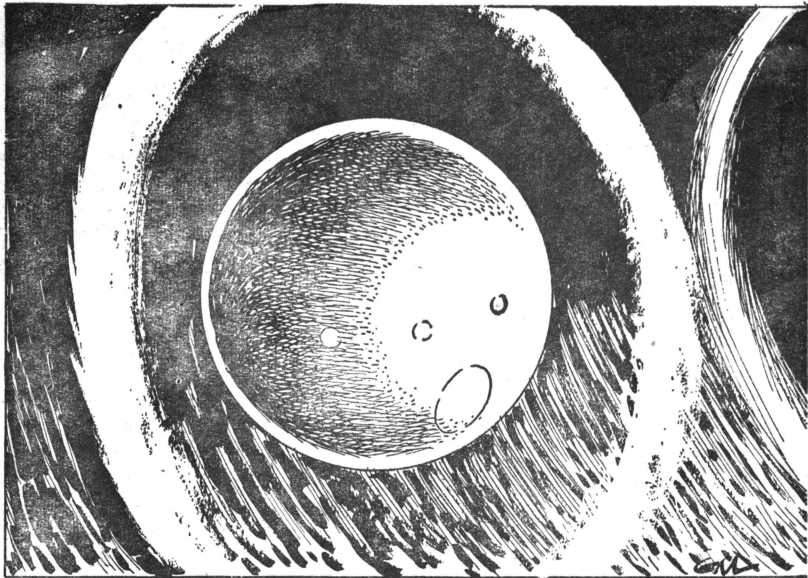
"You told me," snapped Gann. "Pyropod! If it comes back, we're dead!"

She whimpered and tugged at his arm. "Back in here — we can hide —"

"No! There are others. If one finds us this way we don't have a chance. But if I can get a gun —"

He stared down the broad, long hall. The bright jet of the pyropod's tail was out of sight. Perhaps the monster had gone into another room, or down another hallway. Meanwhile the guardsmen were still in a heap of death.

He came to a fast decision. "Julie — I mean — oh, never mind that. Listen! These things can be killed if you know where to aim. I'm going after a gun. You stay in the room!" And he was off, running as hard as he could, straight down the broad hall toward the dying men. He fought the temptation to skulk along



the sides. There was no concealment here. If the creature came back, he would be dead; it was that simple. His only chance was speed. He did that hundred yards in Olympic time —

And it was nearly too slow, at that. Gasping, wheezing, his chest and muscles on fire, he heard a sudden growing volume of sound and looked up.

A howl of sound was coming toward him, and behind it, almost as fast as the sound itself, a pyropod was rocketing at him.

He flung himself to the floor.

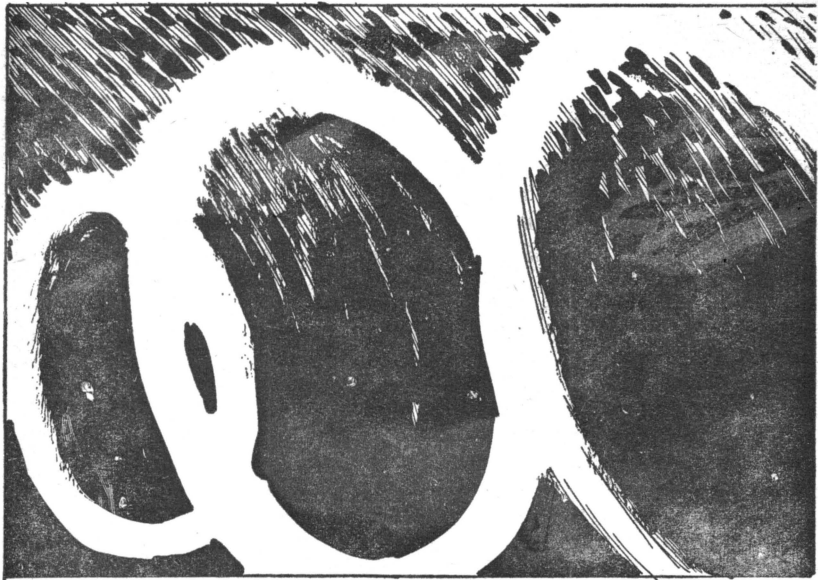
The thing missed him by inches; he caught a quick glimpse of metal jaws and crystal tusks, of enormous talons reaching out for him; then it was past, and he was up and running

He heard the thing crashing, smashing, battering into the statuary and the walls of the hall, stopping itself at heedless cost, but he did not turn. He leaped to the fallen guardsmen, caught up a laser gun, checked its charge and whirled.

The pyropod had completed its turn.

It caught Gann in its pulsing red headlamps. It was screaming at him, a living battle-rocket. He fired one maximum-blast shot into its eye, and tumbled to the ground again.

It screamed in agony as it passed over him. It blundered blindly into a wall, sideswiped a cluster of statuary, gouged out a bright streak in the hard metal of the corridor. Its jet flamed brightly and faded. Gann fired one more shot, then covered his head with his hands.



There was a great distant explosion.

He felt the shock wave pass over him. Some of the corpses near him were stirred by the thrust of it, their bleeding limbs flopping wildly, their unseeing faces nodding.

The pyropod was gone.

But Sister Delta Four had said "dozens" of them . . .

Quickly Gann stooped to the abattoir the pyropod had left and rummaged for weapons. He discovered a half-empty laser weapon, pocketed a light projectile gun, loaded up with the three heaviest-charge laser guns he could find. Then he turned to go after Sister Delta Four.

She was standing just behind him. She had seen what he was doing, and she had done the same. She held two weapons, and in a pouch in her

robes Gann could see the glitter of at least one more.

He hesitated, then grinned.

"Come on," he cried. "Let's see what we can do! Right in the eyes, remember!" He clapped her on the shoulder, and turned and ran in the direction of the Great Hall of the Planner.

A hellish howling and roaring led him to it. He needed no other signs.

Before he got there, he destroyed two more pyropods, neither quite as big as the one that had nearly got them in the hall, and Sister Delta Four had frightened another off with a long-range shot that might or might not have hit.

The Great Hall of the Planner was the mother-hive. It was filled

with the great creatures, ripping through the smoky, sulfurous air, ripping out boulder-sized bits from the walls, from the huge golden chair of the Planner, from anything that would give them reaction mass. They seemed to have conquered the human defenders of the Hall with no trouble, and were fighting among themselves over the spoils.

Then Gann caught the slim ruby flash of a laser weapon.

One of the pyropods bellowed with pain, like an air-raid siren gone mad. It was not a mortal wound, but it must have been an agonizing one; the injured creature hurtled through the air and collided with another feasting beast; the two began to slash each other.

Someone was still alive in the room!

Warning the girl to remain behind, Gann peered cautiously around the door. The laser flash had seemed to come from one of the decorative niches holding statuary, under a painted lunette. Gann took a deep breath and shouted, then ducked back around the door. But it was useless. In the monstrous racket of the snarling, fighting pyropods his voice was unheard.

He caught Sister Delta Four by the shoulder, pulled her close to him so that her ear was next to his lips. "I'm going to try to pick them off one by one!" he cried.

"They're not paying any attention right now. I think I can get most of them. But if any start this way, you shoot right for the eyes!"

She nodded, her face calm and untouched again, the great service

lasers incongruous in her hands. He gave her a last thoughtful glance, unable to forget the bright communion plate that was now once again hidden under the black cowl, then turned toward the Great Hall.

It took him twenty minutes.

He counted, and there were fifteen of the great beasts rocketing and fighting about the hall. He got seven of them, one by one, before there was any trouble.

Then at Sister Delta Four's warning touch, he had to turn and destroy a lone wanderer, racing toward them down the hall.

Then he got three more, and then he noticed that one screamed, burst and died at the far side of the hall that he had not fired on.

Whoever was hiding in the niche across the hall had seen what he was doing, and had copied him.

There were two guns firing then — no, three; for Sister Delta Four stepped out beside him and helped gun down the last survivors, confused and blundering, as the walls shook with the creatures' screams and the air grew acrid and sickening with their fumes.

And then they were all gone.

Hesitantly Gann entered the hall, laser guns ready, eyes darting about as he picked his way across the destroyed battleground.

There were distant bellowings still. Obviously there were still a few strays, elsewhere in the underground palace of the Planner; but most of them were dead in this room. He hurried toward his unknown ally.

Machine General Abel Wheeler stepped stiffly out of the niche and moved toward him. There was a hard grin of victory on his face. He holstered one gun and thrust out a hand with a motion like a piston to grasp Gann's extended clasp. "Well done, Major," he rasped.

"Thank you, sir. I had helped. This is —"

The general's expression did not change. "I know Sister Delta Four," he boomed. "You may tell the Machine that I commend you, Sister. Please contact the Machine now and ascertain its condition. I fear this attack may have been intended to harm it!"

He grasped Gann's arm in a grip of steel and led him away. "Ugly creatures," he rasped, kicking at one enormous ripped cadaver. "Poetic justice, you might say. The Planner has always been fascinated by them. Interesting coincidence that they've appeared out of nowhere, here in his own home grounds." He glanced over his shoulder at Sister Delta Four, who was quickly chiming her tonal beads, setting up her link-box. "See here, Gann. Look at this."

On the floor in front of the niche where General Wheeler had taken refuge there was a square of thick, creamy paper. "What is it, sir?"

"Pick it up, man! See for yourself!"

There were human voices now, coming from the hall. The mighty forces of the Plan of Man were regathering themselves. Order was being restored.

Boysie Gann hesitated. Something was wrong. "The Planner?" he asked. "Is he —" He looked around the great hall, littered with corpses of the invading pyropods and the human guards who had been trapped there.

"Not he, Major! Gone this half hour. Read that document!"

Gann, with a feeling that something was awry, leaned forward and retrieved the paper. He glanced at it.

Then his doubts and uncertainties dropped out of his mind. This paper was strangely familiar. He had seen one just like it — twenty billion miles away — in the hands of the dying Machine Colonel Zafar.

That had been the document they called the Writ of Liberation!

And this one was something almost as earthshaking in its importance, almost as dangerous to the Plan of Man.

Boysie Gann read swiftly, looked up at the silent carved face of General Wheeler wonderingly, then returned to the paper.

It was headed, *To the Planner*, and it said:

To the Planner, or to whoever succeeds him if he is now dead.

You and those who serve with you ignored my warning and discounted the dimming of the Sun.

I send you now a pack of beasts to show that my powers can do more than frighten. They will destroy much. They may yet destroy more.

If I send them again, it will not be to the headquarters of the Planner — if anything remains of that to be destroyed.

The next demonstration will occur in the vaults of the Planning Machine.

Gann looked up, his lips taut, his eyes narrowed. "The Planning Machine!" he said. "General, we must tell Sister Delta Four at once! This must be conveyed to the Machine immediately."

The general rasped: "That decision will be made by me, Major. What have you to say for yourself?"

Startled, Gann said, "Why — I don't know what you mean, General. I didn't have anything to do with —" Then he saw that the general was no longer standing with his arms at his side. One hand held a laser gun again, and it was pointing at him.

"You're under arrest," clipped General Wheeler metallically. "Do not attempt to draw those weapons. Do not speak or move."

Gann opened his mouth, then closed it again. This was the overwhelming, culminating insanity of a fantastic experience. Himself under arrest!

But for what?

He dared not even ask. The general's iron expression showed that he meant his orders to be obeyed.

Behind him, Boysie Gann heard the movements of the guards, coming near — and past them, a distant booming.

He recognized that sound. Another stray pyropod! He forgot his

orders and cried: "General! There's another one —"

General Wheeler rapped: "Be silent! I will not speak again! The men will take care of your beast!" His voice was queerly loud, Gann thought even in his confusion — almost as though the general were speaking not to him, but to the roomful of witnesses.

But he could not help himself. He knew what one single pyropod could do, knew that even the Planner's guards might not be able to cope with it — and knew that in that room was the body and heart of the girl he loved, even though they might be inhabited by the cold, machinelike mind of Sister Delta Four. He whirled, drew his laser gun and was ready as the roar of the pyropod shrieked to the door of the room and the creature appeared.

Gann fired at the red eyes.

The guards were ready too, alerted by the sound and by Gann's quick action; they had turned and were firing. The creature was caught in a dozen bolts of destroying energy. It puffed into flame and exploded . . .

And between Gann and the door, Sister Delta Four, whispering into her linkbox, fell silently forward. She dropped to the floor and did not move, though the linkbox hooted questioningly to her.

"She's hit!" cried Gann, and dropped his weapons, racing to her. He caught her up in his arms, and stared into her black eyes.

His hands were covered with blood. Along one side of her black robes a spreading patch of sticky moisture began to seep, clouding

the bright electronic symbols, trickling to the floor.

There was no heartbeat.

He raised his eyes, stared vacantly at the approaching General Wheeler. "Is she dead?" he demanded, unable to take it in. "Was it my shot? Or —" He paused, trying to remember. Had there been another pencil-thin lance of laser light coming from his side of the room? Had General Wheeler fired over his shoulder and shot Sister Delta Four?

But there was no time to think of that. The general was on him now, his face a metallic mask of sternness. "Disarm that man!" he rasped to the guards. "Take him before the Planner! I accuse him of bringing this document here! I accuse him of admitting the beasts we have destroyed. I accuse him of slaying Sister Delta Four to keep her from denouncing him. I accuse him of being the Starchild!"

X

The battered veterans of the skirmish with the pyropods, limping out of the battlefield and taking the swift elevators to the surface, found the Planner standing like a jovial Santa Claus on a quartz-walled balcony, near the snowy summit of the mountain in which his headquarters was buried.

This was his eyrie, the great crow's-nest of his palace. He chuckled to General Wheeler: "They tried to get me and missed! They'll not have another chance! We'll wipe out every last lone rebel."

The general rasped: "Sir, here is your first traitor! This is the man who is responsible. I found him bearing this document."

Gann cried: "Planner, the general is lying! He knows I didn't —"

"Silence!" snapped the general. The Planner did not even look at Gann. Smiling and nodding, he read the square of paper, then dropped it negligently to the floor.

"You're sure he's the Starchild, General?" he asked.

"Consider the evidence, sir!" rapped the general. "One. He appeared originally in the vaults of the Machine, with no explanation of how he got there. Two. At the same time, the Writ of Liberation appeared, also unexplained. Three. He was bearing this document when I apprehended him. Four. He displayed a suspicious knowledge of the vulnerable spots on the pyropods when his own life was in danger. Five. He purposely slew Sister Delta Four, making it look like an accident, so that she could not speak against him. Six. He was about to do the same to me when I ordered the guards to disarm him. The conclusion, sir, is overwhelmingly indicated that Machine Major Boysie Gann is indeed the Starchild."

"But sir —" cried Gann. The Planner gestured, and one of the guards wrenched his arm, forcing him to be quiet.

"That's better," chuckled the old Planner, beaming down on Boysie Gann. His dose of communion had clearly lasted him a long time; he was as bubbling with good humor as though the Machine even now

were shooting pleasure sensations into his brain. "Yet," said the Planner, smiling good-humoredly at General Wheeler, "one of the guards reported that it was you, not Gann, who killed the sister. Could you have been mistaken?"

"No, sir! Impossible, sir. I had no reason."

The Planner nodded cheerfully and scratched his plump old cheek. He got to his feet and went to the quartz wall of his eyrie, squinting out into the sunset sky. To windward of the summit, the descending sun picked out a towering crown of cumulus. Beyond the crystal parapet, its last rays shimmered on a small waterfall and tinted the falling slopes of evergreens.

"As a matter of fact," the Planner added over his shoulder, "Sister Delta Four is not dead." He stared smiling down the slopes, toward a brown-smogged city below. "She is now in surgery. Her heart was destroyed, but circulation was restored before the brain was damaged. Even now a donor is being provided to replace her lost parts."

Boysie Gann cried joyfully: "Plan be thanked! Sir, she'll tell you that I knew nothing of the pyropods until she herself told me about them!"

"Silence!" rasped General Wheeler. "Guards! Your orders are to keep him quiet. I understand donors are needed for several of your wounded comrades. The first man who fails to keep the prisoner silent will be considered a volunteer!"

"Not so fast," chuckled the Planner. "Your zeal goes too far, General." His heavy-lidded eyes looked dark and old as the lichen-crusted stone below the crystal wall, as he gazed benignly toward the far city in the smog. "Let us Plan," he said, turning and smiling. "Let us decide what to do."

The Vice-Planner for Venus spoke up promptly: "Double the guards in the vaults of the Machine, sir. Institute maximum security measures, admitting no unauthorized person —" He broke off and scratched his enormous nose in puzzlement, as he realized that neither Boysie Gann nor the pyropods had submitted to security check before entering the most heavily guarded places in the Plan of Man.

A male acolyte in the black robes of the Machine, listening to a subdued buzzing from his linkbox, raised his voice suddenly. "The Machine requires the services of the prisoner," he chanted. "The Machine instructs Machine General Wheeler that the prisoner is not to be harmed in any way which will affect his memory or his intellect."

Wheeler's expression was that of a steel-gray thundercloud. The Planner turned toward him, chuckling. "You have your orders, General," he said good-humoredly. "Be sure they are carried out. Do you know what those orders are, young man?" he added, turning with a bland expression of cheer to Boysie Gann.

"No, sir. But I stand ready to serve the Plan of Man!"

"Oh, you do indeed," nodded

the Planner. "In a very special way, as it happens. Major, you have been selected to replace Sister Delta Four. The Machine is about to permit you to receive training in its special service as an acolyte — and then communion!"

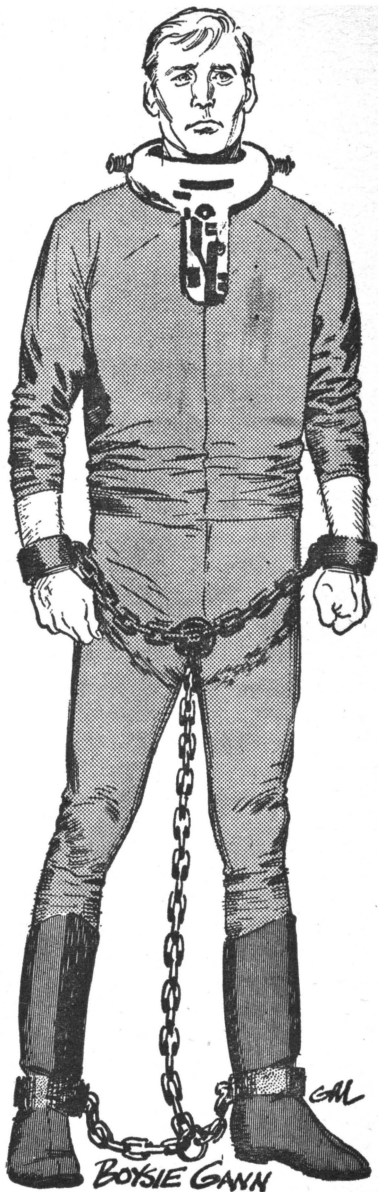
The heavy iron security collar was not enough for so precious an enemy of the Plan as Boysie Gann.

"You're not just a Risk," one of the guards explained solicitously. "See, we can't take a chance, Major. We don't want to blow your little head off. We don't want to kill you. We want to deliver you in one piece, right? So just stand still there, while we put these cuffs on you . . . and we'll take you to the training base . . . and then, when the Machine's all finished with you, *then* we'll blow your head off!" And the guard snapped the fetters cruelly tight on Gann's wrists and started him moving with a shove.

They took him to a subtrainstation first, and would not answer his questions. Was Julie Martinet all right? Why had General Wheeler lied? What was the Machine going to do with him? To each question there was only one response: "Shut up, you! Move on!"

But then there was nowhere to move. They were in the subtrain station, the great cold vaulted shed where the enormous electron-flow driven globes waited to carry their passengers through tunnels in the earth, across a continent or under a sea. But no globe was moving.

They brought Gann to a plat-



form, ten security guards forming the detail that surrounded him, and then they waited. Boysie Gann could see that the station was a military base, because of the armored guard-boxes beside the troughs, and because of the black Techni-corps uniforms on everyone. That was understandable enough; this was the depot that served the Planner himself, the one nearest his tunneled-out mountain retreat. But what was not understandable was that there were neither arrivals nor departures.

Behind him, a track lock closed with a wheeze of leaking air. A Togetherness girl froze her automatic smile as she caught sight of his collar, and hurried past. The guards in their radar horns gazed vacantly after her.

"Look," said Boysie Gann, "what's the matter? What are we waiting for?"

"Shut up, you," growled a machine-sergeant of the guards. But he had a worried look. One of his men said something to him; the sergeant replied in an undertone. All Gann could catch was: "— trouble in the tunnels somewhere. Now shut up. When they're ready for us, we'll know."

The great forty-foot bubbles waited silently in their passage cradles, and Boysie Gann stood regarding them. Wherever he was going, it was probably somewhere far away. Short-haul trips were seldom by way of the subtrains. The great atomic drills of the Plan had tunneled straight-line passages from all major centers to all others, sometimes relayed, sometimes piercing nearly

through the nickel-iron core of the Earth itself in a single non-stop thrust from Sidney, say, to Calcutta. The great freight and passenger globes reached speeds so great that Coriolis force was their principal adversary; the electrostatic hoops that banded the evacuated tunnels were double and triple strength on the side against which the earth's rotation tended to throw the spheres. Via the subtrains, no point on Earth was more than a few hours away from any other . . .

Boysie Gann became aware of a confused mutter of excitement, and focused his eyes on what was going on in the subtrain shed.

A great dull freight-sphere was sliding gently into the station, emerging from the mouth of a belt-ringed tunnel.

"About time they got 'em going again," grumbled the machine-sergeant. "All right, let's move out. They'll be letting us board now."

The sergeant was right. Within ten minutes they were in a subtrain globe, settling down in a passenger compartment.

But there was a wait of nearly a quarter of an hour more before Boysie Gann felt the gentle lurch that meant they had begun to move.

His guards were more relaxed, now that they were in the subtrain. Gann could not very well escape them now, not when there was nowhere to go but the interior of a forty-foot sphere, with nothing outside but great electrostatic hoops in an airless tunnel, whizzing by at speeds of thousands of miles an

hour. A couple of the guards disappeared, came back with self-satisfied smiles and relieved the others. Clearly there was a Togetherness canteen on the globe. Even the radar-horned sergeant looked somehow less inimical, more like a human being.

Above all things, Gann wished he knew what had happened to Sister Delta Four. There had been a moment there, while the pyropods were attacking, when she had seemed less like a cold-hearted servant of the Machine and more like the girl he had kissed at Playa Blanca. He dreamed of getting her back — of somehow winning favor with the Machine and receiving the great reward of Julie Martinet's release —

It was only a dream. Considering his position now, it was an insane one.

Gann realized that he should be devoting every second's thought he could to planning — to trying to understand what had put him in this position, and what he could do. But it seemed quite hopeless. He had the giddy sensation that the universe had gone mad. From that first moment on Polaris Station, when he had followed Machine Colonel Zafar down to the methane snowball, events had carried him helplessly along: they made no sense to him, but there was nothing he could do to help interpret them. Their incomprehensibility was intrinsic. It was not that he was lacking in comprehension, it was that the things which had happened were not to be understood in the

sane, sensible terms of life under the Plan of Man. . .

He felt a giddy sensation again, and this time it was not in his mind.

Boysie Gann leaped to his feet in alarm. He could not help thinking of the strange queasiness that had preceded his twenty billion mile drop into the Planning Machine's catacombs — the same sensation, just before the pyropods struck —

But this was not the same thing at all. The lurching, twisting sensation he felt was simply explained. The subtrain car had come to a stop. It was hanging now, spinning slowly, between the charged hoops of its airless tunnel.

If Gann had been in any doubt, the cries from outside his room, the shouts of guards within, removed that doubt quickly. Everyone on the subtrain globe seemed to be shouting at once. "What's the matter?" "We've stopped!" "Great Plan, we're a couple of hundred miles down! The temperature —" "Help me! Let me out of here!" The voices were a confused babble, but they all had in common the warning knife-edge of panic. There was terror on that subtrain car — terror that could not be calmed with words, for its base was all too real.

The machine sergeant comprehended the situation at once. With a jerk of his radar-horned head he bawled at his squad: "Come on, outside! Those sheep'll stampede if we don't keep 'em in line!"

Boysie Gann was left alone. Outside he could hear the Technicorps guards shouting orders at the terri-

fied travelers on the subtrain. No one seemed to know what had happened. They had stopped, that was all. Hundreds of miles below the surface of the earth, the rock outside hot enough to melt aluminum, the pressure great enough to crush diamonds into dust if the electrostatic hoops ever faltered — they were stopped. Whatever it was that had disrupted the service before they left the station was probably disrupting it again.

The only difference was that now they were where no help could ever reach them, where if the fields in the hoops failed they would be dead in the least fraction of a second — where even if the field maintained itself they would be dead in a few days of asphyxiation, unless they could move.

Then, abruptly, there was another lurch, and they were moving again.

As the great forty-foot sphere gathered speed and stability, Boy-sie Gann became aware that he had been hardly breathing. There was a great cry of thanksgiving from the people outside his room. One by one his guards came back, chattering and laughing, seeming almost human. They did not include him in their conversation, but they did not go out of their way to keep him out. One of them even disappeared for a few minutes, then came back with a tray of drinks from the Togetherness canteen . . .

And then the great globe shook again. Shook — crashed into something that shrieked of destroyed metal — slammed to a jolting, smashing stop.

Gann and the guards tumbled across the room, hurled against the wall like thrown gravel.

Boysie Gann heard screams and a rending sound of the metal of the great sphere being crushed. "We've had it!" someone shrieked. "The fields have failed!" — and as he went deep into black oblivion, not yet feeling pain but knowing that he was bleeding, he had struck the wall too hard to get up and walk away, Gann had time for one last thought: He's right, thought Gann; this is the end.

— When, some indeterminate time later, he opened his eyes and found himself still alive, he was almost disappointed.

Gann was in an emergency hospital. Stiff white bandages covered part of his eyes; his head ached as though a corps of drummers were using it for practice; he could see, under the shadow of the bandages, that one arm was encased in a balloon-cast.

But he was alive.

A Togetherness nurse was bending over him. He said clearly, "I thought the tube collapsed."

"Hush," she said gently. "It did. But you were almost at the surface, and the wrecking squads dug you out."

"Almost at the surface?" He squinted past her, at the second figure standing by his bed. For one crazy instant on waking he had thought it was the Angel of Death come to take him away. Now he saw it was an acolyte of the Machine, the linkbox in her hand,

whispering tinkling notes to the microphone it contained. "I — I guess I'm at the training center," he said.

The nurse nodded. "Sleep if you can," she ordered. And Boysie Gann was glad to comply . . .

For three days Boysie Gann had the status of a convalescent. It was a considerable improvement over his status as a major public enemy.

The immediate guard detail was withdrawn — several had been killed in the tube implosion and were going through the messy business of resuscitation and repair at the Body Bank. Gann was free to wander within the limited confines of one wing of the hospital in which he was a patient.

He was even allowed access to the recreation lounge, run by a young Togetherness girl who reminded him of Quarla Snow. Her disposition was like Quarla's, too. She did not seem conscious of his collar. Most important, she let him watch the news-screens to his heart's content.

Boysie Gann had been away from Earth, off on the Reefs or in intensive custody for so long that he had lost touch with the running news stories.

He sat and dreamed.

What was happening on the screen soaked slowly into his mind and heart. He watched, and loved, the gold-haired, long-legged choruses of Togetherness girls cooing their gentle threats: "Work for the Plan! Live for the Plan! *You* don't want to go to Heaven and make spare parts for the Plan!" Though he knew his chances of winding up in the Body

Bank called Heaven and making "spare parts for the Plan" must be rated pretty high, there was no fear in what the girls were singing. It was a part of a life that he had lost, and he wanted it back.

Above all he wanted to find himself again.

Boysie Gann could not recognize himself in the enemy of the Machine who had been castigated by the Planner himself, denounced by Machine General Wheeler, interrogated by Sister Delta Four. That Boysie Gann was a creature who had been born on Polaris Station, a man who lived with undead Reef rats and queer creatures called spacelings and pyropods. Gann could not fit the strange rebellious shape of this other Boysie Gann into his personality, could not add the two identities and produce a vector sum of his future life . . .

He sat up straight and glared at the view-screen.

He had been watching a world-wide news broadcast with half his mind, hardly conscious of what he saw, although in fact what he saw was exciting enough. The news broadcast with almost a catalogue of disasters — a crashed Plan cruiser that destroyed half a city, earthquakes in Antarctica, a runaway nuclear reactor on the Indian subcontinent. And then there had been a nearer disaster. The screen had shown the very subtrain catastrophe that had put him in this place.

And called it sabotage!

Gann blinked. He hardly recognized the accident. The bland fat Technicolonel puffing out his gruff

charges of criminal conspiracy seemed to be talking about some other disaster, on some other world. Malicious sabotage? A bomb planted in the subtrain to discredit the Planner and the Planning Machine?

Most incongruous of all — *himself* as the arch-villian, with the radar-horned guard sergeant as his accomplice?

Gann put down his glass of vitamin-laced fruit juice and hobbled over to the Togetherness girl in charge of the lounge.

He was shaking. "Please," he begged. "Did you see that? What is it all about?"

She scolded him sunnily. "Now, now! Your duty under the Plan is to get well! You must prepare yourself to return to serve — no questions, no worries — nothing but healing and rest!"

He said with difficulty, "It said on the newscast that I was responsible for the subtrain accident. It isn't so! And the guard sergeant who was in charge of me — what happened to him?"

Her large, clear eyes darkened for a moment in puzzlement. But only for a moment. She would not question her orders; if her orders said that she was to care for an enemy of the Plan, she would care for an enemy of the Plan. She shook her head and, smiling, led him back to the couch. "Drink your juice," she said with playful severity, and would say no more. To her, what the Plan of Man ordained was necessarily right and true — because "right" and "truth" were defined by the Plan of Man.

Or so thought Boysie Gann.

So thought Boysie Gann, and was aware in some part of him that there was something in that thought which was dangerous — dangerous to him and to all mankind, for if the sweet and empty-headed Togetherness girl accepted the Plan so unquestioningly . . .

He could not put the thought together. It almost seemed as though he himself, and General Wheeler, and even the Planner — as if all the human race within the Plan were in some sense no less empty-headed than a Togetherness girl.

But he could not complete the thought. And then time ran out and he no longer had leisure for such thoughts, for he began the course of training that would lead him to communion with the Machine.

Dyadic relation: *I hate spinach.*
Ternary relation: *I hate spinach except when it is well washed.*
Quaternary relation: *I hate spinach except when it is well washed because the sand gets in my teeth.*

With instructor and book, with constant subliminal tapes droning while he slept and teaching machines snapping at him awake, Boysie Gann began to learn the calculus of statement, the logic of relations, the geometries of Hilbert and Ackermann and Boole. Conjunctions and disjunctions, axioms and theorems, double negations and metastatements . . . they all surged through his brain, nesting with destructive dilemmas and syllogisms in the mood of Barbara. He leaned to transpose and commute. He

learned the principle of exportation and the use of dots as brackets. He learned the unambiguous phrasing and inflectionless grammar of machine programming; he learned the distinction between perceptual symbols and motor symbols, and learned to make the auditory symbols that bridged the gap. For hours with an oscillator squeal beeping in his ear to guide him, he sang endless quarter-tone scales. He studied the factorization problems of the General Problem Solver and learned to quantify relationships. He learned the construction of truth tables, and how to use them to track down tautologies in a premise.

There were neither classes nor schoolrooms, there was only study and work. It went on and on, endlessly. Gann woke to the drone of the tape-recorded voice under his pillow, ate with the chime of sonic bells in his ear, fell exhausted into his bed with schematics of shared-time computer inputs racing through his mind.

There was a world outside the training center, but he had lost touch with it completely. In stolen moments he caught snatches of conversation between his few human contacts — the Togetherness girls who served him at table, the guards who roamed the halls — that his mind was too hard-pressed to fit together. The Starchild. The Writ of Liberation. Disasters under the earth, rocket explosions in space. They did not matter; what mattered was null hypotheses and probabilistic calculus. If he had time enough, and thought enough, to probe be-



THE PLANNER

yond the demands of the training, his mind always reached one step ahead — to the moment when training was over and he would receive the metal badge of communion in his flesh — and it recoiled, and returned to Hilbert and Boole.

When the course was over, Gann did not realize it.

He went to sleep — exhausted, as he was always exhausted in this place. He tumbled into the narrow, hard bed in the solitary, tile-walled room. The voice under his pillow promptly began to recite to him:

“— generate a matrix K , utilizing the mechanisms of associative retrieval to add contextual relationships to coordinate retrieval. Let the i -th row and j -th column show the degree of association —”

Some part of him was taking it in, he knew, but his conscious mind was hardly aware of it. All he was aware of was his own inadequacy. He would never match the pure, crystalline tones of Sister Delta Four and the other acolyte; he did not have the voice for it. He would never grasp and retain all the information theory and programming he had been taught; he did not have the training for it . . .

He drifted off to sleep.

He was barely aware that something was wrong — some new scent in the atmosphere, some hardly perceived whisper of motion, as though someone were waiting outside his room for him to be asleep.

Then the anesthetic gas that had been piped through his pillow took effect. He slept. Deeply.

When he woke he felt a minor but nagging ache in the skin and the bone of his forehead.

He was in another room — green-walled, surgical.

He did not have to touch his forehead to know that while he slept the surgeons had been at work, the hair-thin electrodes slipped into the micrometrically located centers of his brain, the bright badge of communion implanted on his brow.

In the mammalian brain exist bundles of nerves and specialized tissue which control mood and emotion, as well as those which control motor activities, homeostatic regulation, conscious thought and the various other activities of that three-pound mass of hypertrophied tissue.

One such area is the pleasure center. Slip a fine platinum electric into it by stereotaxic surgery. Feed it a carefully measured, milliamperetiny surge of electricity. The result is ecstasy! Fit a laboratory animal with such an electrode and with a key it can operate, and it will go on pressing the key, pressing the key, pressing the key . . . it will not pause for food or drink or fear . . . it will sear itself with delight until it collapses of exhaustion, and wake only to press the key once more.

The jolt of ecstasy that tore through Boysie Gann's being in that first moment of awakening with the communion plate in his forehead and the electrodes embedded in his brain was like nothing he had ever imagined. It was taste, feeling, odor and light; it was the wild delight

of sex and the terrifying joy of daredevil sport; it was all the things he had ever known at once, magnified unbearably. Time stopped.

He was adrift in a turbulent sea of sensation . . .

Eons and lifetimes later, he became conscious of humanity again. He was back in his body. The tides of quintessential pleasure had receded from around him, and left him aching and dry.

He opened his eyes, and saw a Technicorps medical orderly retreating from him, the communion probe wires in his hand.

He had been cut off from the joy of the Planning Machine.

Gann took a long shuddering breath and reconciled himself to being human again. He could understand Sister Delta Four. He could accept his destiny in communion with the Machine. No other reward could be half as great as this, no other purpose as important —

Dazedly he became aware that something was wrong.

The Technicorps man's face was pale with fear. Voices shouted from outside, and one of them was queerly familiar.

Gann struggled to his feet, apprehensive and wary.

When the door burst open it was Machine General Wheeler who came into the room like a raging typhoon. "Gann!" he roared. "Starchild! You devil, what have you done?"

"I? Done? Nothing, General — and I'm not the Starchild, I swear it!"

"Filth!" howled the general. "Don't lie to me! What have you done to the Planning Machine?"

Gann started to reply, to defend himself. The general gave him no chance. "Lies!" he raged. "Starchild, you've destroyed us all! Admit it! Admit that it was you who has driven the Planning Machine hopelessly mad!"

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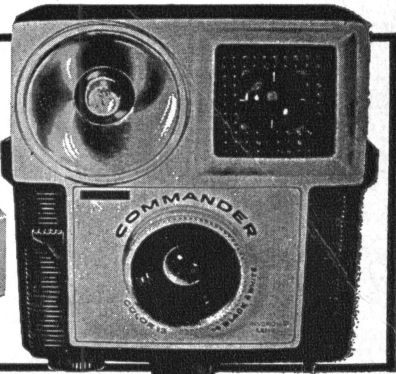
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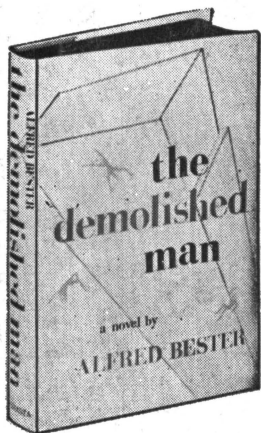
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